

THE RAVAGERS OF THE SIERRAS!

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Buffalo Bill's Ban; or, Cody to the Rescue.

BY LEON LEWIS,

AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL'S DARING ROLE," "CAPTAIN READY, THE RED RANSOMER," ETC., ETC.



"WE—WE KNOW YOU WERE COMING, CODY," GASPED THE FALLEN ASSASSIN. "OUR ORDERS FROM THE CAP'N—WERE TO KILL YOU!"

Buffalo Bill's Ban:

OR, CODY TO THE RESCUE.

A Romance of the Clean-out in Southwest Colorado.

BY LEON LEWIS,
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL'S DARING ROLE."

CHAPTER I. LURKING ASSASSINS.

BUFFALO BILL!

Yes, the lone horseman was he.

Just where one would expect to find him, and in just such a situation as he likes best—in the midst of a great solitude, splendidly mounted and well-armed, and engaged in one of those secret and dangerous missions to which the military authorities of the Wild West so often called him in his scouting days.

In more precise terms, he was riding Westward at an easy pace, late in the afternoon of a dismal, supple and blustering day, about midway on the stage road, (then a mere trail), between Durango and Fort Harris, in Southwestern Colorado.

His identity was somewhat concealed, as any man's can be so readily with a muffler, broadrimmed sombrero and army overcoat, but the air in those elevated regions acquires a well-defined chill by the middle of September—the date of this chronicle—and the few persons he encountered scarcely noticed that he avoided observation as much as was possible.

He was ascending at a walk the slope of a divide near the fork which leads toward the still unpretentious hamlet of Parrott, when a double detonation suddenly disturbed the silence, and a couple of balls whistled past in such close proximity to his head as to show that they were intended to kill.

Unslung his rifle, he spurred his horse promptly in the direction from which the missiles had come, but had no sooner manifested this intention than two men sprung from the covert of rocks and bushes beside the trail, making strenuous efforts to escape.

In their desperate haste, the one nearest the scout caught his trigger in a bush, and the remaining barrel of his rifle was discharged, the ball passing completely through the body of his associate, who fell headlong, death stricken.

With a yell of mingled horror and terror, the author of this fatality darted to one of two horses in waiting, gained his saddle at a bound, and dashed away at a furious gallop.

Buffalo Bill followed him far enough—perhaps one hundred rods—to see him turn into a dense pine grove where a dozen men, in all sorts of worn and wild raiment, and armed like outlaws, were seated around an almost smokeless fire, in the act of eating a supper consisting principally of game, as was indicated by the carcasses of a bear and deer hanging near by, and then he drew his horse to a walk and faced about, retracing his steps to the scene of the shooting.

"We—we knew you were coming, Cody," gasped the fallen assassin. "Our orders from the cap'n—were to kill you!"

"Who is 'we'?" asked the scout.

"The Ravagers! Beware—"

A gasp, and the man was dead.

"So, this is my first encounter with the enemy?" muttered the scout, as he returned to the trail and resumed his journey. "But how is it that these men are aware of my coming? I have spoken of my intention only to Colonel Naylor and Ben Letts. Ben, I am sure, has said nothing. The news must have come from some one very near the colonel, and who stands high in his confidence. I must keep my eyes open for that traitor!"

He looked back at the pine grove, where not the least sign of life and movement was apparent, and a smile curled his lips.

"They're well posted," he added. "They know what sort of horse I'm accustomed to ride, and realize that it would be a fool's game to pursue me."

He contrived to walk his horse another minute, looking back, as if to tempt the enemy to pursue him, that he might see more of them; then he chirped to his steed and left the scene of his narrow escape at an easy gallop.

CHAPTER II.

CALLED TO DANGEROUS WORK.

HOLDING steadily to his course, with no other delay than that caused by easing his horse up and down the many sharp crests on this route, the scout at length reached his destination, just as the first shadows of the coming night began to descend around him.

Fort Harris, primarily a mere post of the regular army, with a permanent mixed garrison of two or three companies, infantry and cavalry, is now both fort and village, some forty or fifty dwellings, including several frame houses of fair size, having gathered around the original military inclosure.

As he reached the entrance of the fort, the

scout was met in person by Colonel Naylor, the commandant, a fine-looking, genial, and cultured gentleman of middle age, who was on the lookout for him, and who greeted him with all the warmth of an old acquaintance, passing his horse to a waiting orderly, and conducting him to headquarters, a neat, two-story frame house, with cupola and verandas, which stood nearly in the center of the inclosure.

"I am delighted to see you again, Mr. Cody," said the colonel, leading the way into the house. "I was afraid you wouldn't come."

"What! after the pressing call you sent me?" returned the great scout, explorer and detective, as he stood his rifle in a corner of the hall, and laid off his sombrero and overcoat, displaying a civilian suit of serviceable cheviot. "There was no occasion for your fears, colonel. I have never yet refused to honor any demands of this nature."

"I know that," acknowledged Colonel Naylor, waving his guest into the parlor, "but I was afraid you couldn't come just at present. Follow me, please," he added, leading the way into his own sleeping apartment. "Here's everything necessary to take off that dust, and in ten minutes our supper will be on the table. Return to me as soon as you are ready. I regret exceedingly that Mrs. Naylor is not here to welcome you, but she has gone into the village to pass the night at the bedside of a very dear lady friend who is dangerously ill."

He returned to the parlor, which was pleasantly furnished and lighted, with a glowing fire in the grate, and thence proceeded to the kitchen, where his cook and maid-of-all-work—a motherly, good-natured, and shrewd half-breed woman of some forty-five years—was busy with her preparations for supper. Thanks to the attention which had been given during the afternoon to the expected arrival, the interval named had not quite expired when Colonel Naylor and his guest seated themselves facing each other, with a liberally supplied table between them.

"Of course, Zellie," said the commandant, with a nod toward the door which had just closed behind the cook, "is discretion itself," after long service with us. But I believe we are quite competent to wait upon ourselves this once, Mr. Cody, for the sake of being able to discuss our affairs without the presence of a third person. The truth is," and he lowered his voice, "I wish what I have to say to remain essentially private, and that's why I shall even refrain from asking my officers to meet you until to-morrow's dinner."

"I comprehend, sir," returned Buffalo Bill, in a corresponding tone, with an almost imperceptible start, turning an attentive ear toward a door communicating with a rear hall. "We are to speak of the exploits and mysteries of the Ravagers. Is Ben Letts still here?"

"Ben Letts? Certainly," was the colonel's answer, "and I really don't know what we should do without him. His time expired last month, to be sure, but he continues to stay on, and says he expects there'll soon be a demand for his services, as in the days when he and you scouted together. In fact, it's partly owing to Ben's advice and entreaty that I've taken the liberty of asking you to come to our assistance. He has lodgings outside in the village, but he's here almost every day, and is probably here now."

"Then I wish you'd send for him, colonel," interrupted Cody, in a whisper, "and let him take the place of the sneaking scoundrel who is listening at yonder door!"

"What! you think—"

"Look and see!"

Gaining his feet in silence, Colonel Naylor crossed the floor in three or four strides, with the stealthiness of a tiger, and drew open the door in question, abruptly.

Sure enough, his favorite orderly, the man who had received the scout's horse, had been listening at the keyhole, and now found himself surprised in such a position and attitude that his guilt was only too evident.

"Ah, here you are, Finklestone!" cried the commandant, in rage and disgust, taking him by the ear. "Thought you'd listen to what we'd have to say, did you? But you'll never play eavesdropper here again, you miserable fraud!"

Still holding the man by the ear, Colonel Naylor rushed him out through the back hall, which Zellie was just coming to light, and out of the back door, into the large open area at the rear of the house.

"Here, corporal of the guard!" he shouted, addressing the officer in charge of the relief, who stood near a fire in front of the guard-house, which was about six rods from the house. "Take charge of this prisoner."

"Yes, colonel," responded the corporal, advancing promptly to meet Finklestone, who was being expedited toward him with a speed corresponding to the colonel's wrath and excitement.

"And also take notice that he is reduced to the ranks!" continued the commandant, thrusting the disgraced orderly with a final twist of the ear into the custody of the corporal. "Put him in the calaboose, and detail a file to stand guard over him with loaded rifles and fixed

bayonets until I can find time to come and put him in irons."

"I will, colonel—"

"And also send Ben Letts to me!"

"Sorry, colonel," replied the corporal, "but Ben Letts has not been here to-day—"

"Then send three men to hunt him up, and bring him to me, Dimmick, the moment he is found."

"All right, colonel," rejoined Dimmick. "I'll attend to the matter immediately."

And with this the corporal marched his prisoner to the guard-house, while the colonel returned to his guest, exclaiming:

"The soulless reprobate! And to think that I have raised that man from the ranks, rushing him through all the grades in five months. But, tell me, Cody," and the commandant resumed his seat, "how came you to get track of him so soon?"

"I noticed him when he took my horse," explained the scout. "He seemed to have a bad face, under some strange excitement of that moment, and I readily detected that he has a sinister interest in my arrival and presence. A quick ear and the watchfulness which belongs to my trade did the rest. Who is he?"

"I'll tell you later. Why do you ask?"

"Because he has plenty of friends in this garrison, whoever he may be," declared Bill, his voice again sinking to a whisper. "I was looking from the rear hall—without allowing myself to be seen, of course—at the moment you handed him over to Dimmick, and could not help remarking that the majority of the soldiers present are his friends. I believe they would have fired upon you, colonel, if he had called for assistance. The thought struck me that he and they might be Ravagers!"

Colonel Naylor appeared to be startled by these declarations, which, it must be admitted, were of a very startling character.

"Be that as it may, colonel," added the scout, "I would advise you to look well to his safe-keeping! Otherwise he may give you the slip, or be rescued by some of his associates! I have no hesitation in saying he's a scheming and dangerous man—yes, a traitor!"

"I'll put him in irons as soon as we are done supper," returned Colonel Naylor, with involuntary sternness, "and if I'm not greatly mistaken, he'll remain in them until he is brought before a drum-head court-martial."

Buffalo Bill remained silent a few moments, with an air of deep thought, and then said:

"There's another reason, colonel, why I was so prompt to notice that fellow. I arrived here with my teeth on edge," and he smiled. "In other terms, I had an adventure with the Ravagers on my way from Durango!"

And with this he told his story, not a little to the consternation of his hearer.

"And now the grand question is, Where is the leak?" continued the scout. "I saw at a glance how astonished Finklestone was to see me arrive here *safely*, and how upset he seemed at my presence. To 'spot' him was easy. That man is a treacherous villain!"

The colonel assented in silence, as if reflecting upon sundry dark problems suggested by his guest's convictions, and then he aroused himself and said:

"But all this time our supper is getting cold, Cody. Fortunately I have reserved too good an appetite—in the hope of having you here—to allow any such man as Budd Finklestone to interfere with it."

"The same here, colonel," avowed Buffalo Bill, with his usual hearty cheerfulness, and in another moment the two gentlemen were giving their best attention to the repast before them.

For some time Colonel Naylor remained silent, as if painfully preoccupied with the scout's suggestion of the presence of Ravagers within the fort, and especially with the scout's encounter with the outcasts on his way thither.

"Since they're as near as that, and so fully informed," he finally remarked, "they may well have smuggled themselves within these walls. In any case, we cannot discuss the situation too soon, or too soon get to work to change it for the better. Let's talk as we eat. I've summoned you here, Cody, for a desperate and dangerous undertaking, namely, the unearthing and suppression of these infernal Ravagers!"

CHAPTER III.

MYSTERIOUSLY HIDDEN.

BUFFALO BILL expressed his desire to know more of the situation thus suggested, and Colonel Naylor continued:

"You have of course received some hint of the outrages which have been committed in Southwestern Colorado during the last eighteen months?"

"The work of the Ravagers? Yes, colonel," replied the scout, with keen interest. "But, you'll remember that I'm very imperfectly posted, have been busy elsewhere, and will kindly give me details. There has been a great deal of lawlessness and violence?"

"More than ever before, Cody. In fact, a veritable reign of terror!"

Ere another word could be uttered, Dimmick came in briskly by the rear hall, after an excited knock.

"If you please, colonel," he announced, "the Ravagers have been at it again, and here comes a dozen fugitives, with several children, asking for food and shelter!"

"Put them in a casemate, Dimmick," ordered the commandant, "and see that they do not lack for anything in the way of food and bedding. I will call upon them immediately after supper. Where are they from?"

"From near Cedar Crossing, sir."

"It's the old story, no doubt?"

"Precisely, colonel," replied Dimmick. "They were visited early last evening by a band of Ravagers who are believed to be under the command of 'Whoop-pee' himself. All their buildings were burned, their stock driven off, and their grain and all other supplies carried away!"

"Leaving them with barely the clothes they stood in, as is usual in such cases, corporal?"

"Exactly, colonel."

The commandant made a gesture of dismissal, and the corporal vanished.

"But just what are these Ravagers, colonel?" asked the scout. "I can only suppose, from what you and Ben Letts have written me, and especially from what I've heard since reaching this neighborhood, that they are a band of unknown miscreants who are devastating the whole region to the westward of us."

"And that's just what they are, Cody," declared Colonel Nayler, earnestly, suspending his attentions to his supper for a moment. "They're a band of demons! They waste and destroy everything they cannot drive or carry away, and hence the name which is generally applied to them. They not only destroy isolated ranches and dwellings, but wipe out entire hamlets, seizing every sort of stock and grain wherever they can lay hands upon it. Sometimes they appear as 'hostiles' under a chief who is known as 'Bad Medicine,' and sometimes they come as masked robbers, with a leader they call 'Whoop-pee.' They've burned every fairly good house in the western half of this county, and seem to have done this as a part of their system, which is one of wanton destruction. They have carried off from the district indicated nearly all the potatoes and other supplies of the ranchers and squatters, and have left their victims neither cow, sheep nor steer. As to horses, no man hereabouts can be certain of finding one on his premises when he gets up of a morning."

"What a state of things!" commented Buffalo Bill. "Their name describes them!"

"But what gives especial terror to the ravages of these ruffians," continued the commandant, "is the fact that no one has ever been able to obtain the least clew to their identities, their numbers or their hiding-places and headquarters. No one knows whence they come or whither they go. One day here, and the next day fifty miles away, committing their characteristic crimes in both places, they elude and defy all pursuit so readily and surely that our best scouts and oldest frontiersmen are powerless to do the least thing toward their detection and suppression. I myself, for instance, as much as I have heard and seen of the doings of the Ravagers during the last year, have never set eyes on one of them. Nobody, as far as I am aware, has ever run one of them to his hole!"

"But you've made the effort?" queried Buffalo Bill, thoughtfully.

"Repeatedly, and with as many men as I could spare without endangering the very existence of this fort and village," replied Colonel Nayler. "I have sent out strong detachments again and again to hunt the villains, and have taken the field in person."

"And with what results, colonel?"

"Why, without any results whatever, other than those of a negative character," affirmed the colonel, his brows contracting. "In every case the enemy seemed to be as well posted as ourselves in regard to all we were doing, and laid low and waited, keeping out of the way. They were so well-informed, in fact," he added, "that I believe some traitor in our midst must have revealed all our plans to them."

"That is indeed probable," affirmed the scout, his eyes turning involuntarily in the direction Budd Finklestone had gone. "But do the Ravagers seem to have any particular likes and dislikes in their dealings with the community?"

"Well, yes," answered Colonel Nayler. "They seem to be particularly 'down' on all sheriffs, judges and other representatives of the law, and to be particularly 'sweet,' if I may use that term, on soldiers, and especially cavalrymen."

A smile of comprehension flitted over the features of the colonel's guest.

"Has any of their peculiar work been done in this vicinity?" he asked.

"Certainly, within easy striking distance of this fort," was the colonel's reply. "In fact, Cedar Crossing, where the affair of last night took place, is only fifteen miles northwest of us. And yet not a trace of the Ravagers! Not a hint as to their abiding-place!"

"Was Budd Finklestone outside of this fort, yesterday?" asked the scout.

"Budd? Yes. He went out to look for a deserter named Jack Bossy—he often goes out on such business—and did not return till late this morning."

"Ah, indeed!"

The smile of Buffalo Bill deepened, as if he had reached some well-defined theory in connection with the ravages under discussion.

"But, what are these men driving at?" he asked. "What is their ultimate purpose?"

"First, to live without work, or at the expense of others," replied the colonel. "Second, to terrorize all settlers and ranchers and drive them out of this part of the State, so that they can have it to themselves. I may add that they do not kill unnecessarily, or when they are not resisted. But, woe to any one who ventures to defend his home and possessions! For all such these miscreants have no mercy!"

"Give me some further details of their proceedings, please," requested the scout.

"Well," answered the officer, "there have been so many mysterious disappearances lately that the whole county is in a panic. Take the case of Alice King, for instance. She went out on the morning of the 16th of August to look for a calf which had strayed during the night, and has not been seen since, nor has any hint been given of her fate. Take, too, the case of Sarah Gannett. She was the only child of her parents, who were well-to-do people living on an unsurveyed ranch just west of Mancos. One evening in July, when her parents were about to retire for the night, they heard an awful scream from the chamber of their daughter. Hurrying to her room, they found it tenantless, and nothing to tell them how the girl had vanished. Another case is that of John Scott, a ranchman, who had signalized himself by resisting the Ravagers on one of their raids. He disappeared one night, to be seen no more, and such was also the fate of a neighbor named Wilton. To these cases many others might be added."

"Was Budd Finklestone outside of the fort the night Alice King disappeared?" asked the scout.

"Yes, he was, as I can recall from a number of circumstances. Why do you ask?"

"I will tell you later, colonel," returned Buffalo Bill smilingly. "But, about the raids of the Ravagers? Have they been many?"

"They've made three as hostiles and two as masked robbers," replied the colonel. "All of these raids came from the direction of the San Juan Valley and River, and their line of retreat was generally the Mancos, so that it is at least suggested that their principal hiding-place is somewhere near the junction of the Mancos and San Juan."

"Did you go that way to look for them?"

"I did, but in vain! They vanished as completely as if they had climbed a tree and pulled the tree up after them!"

"So that, up to this date, the Ravagers seem to have the best of the struggle?"

"The best of it?" repeated the commandant. "They have the whole field to themselves. We're absolutely powerless to cope with them. In fact, we're losing ground daily. I've even had fears that the ubiquitous demons might make an attack on the fort and village, and have at the same time waked up to the fact that a portion of the garrison is corrupt, demoralized, and indifferent. For these and many similar reasons, Cody, I've asked you to come here and help us out. We want to get track of these Ravagers and suppress them, and you're the man for this work. I hope that nothing I've said will cause you to shrink from the undertaking."

"Certainly not," declared the scout; "to the contrary. I'll do what I can. The Ravagers may elude me, as they have eluded others, but I doubt it."

And again his glances turned thoughtfully in the direction in which Budd Finklestone had vanished, while he renewed his attentions to his long-neglected supper.

CHAPTER IV.

CONCERNING FINKLESTONE'S IDENTITY.

LITTLE more was said until the two had finished their supper and lighted cigars.

"Who is this Finklestone?" then asked Buffalo Bill, the deep thought in which he had been absorbed beginning to find expression.

"He's one of a dozen men who came here last March and enlisted in a body," replied Colonel Nayler. "They claimed to have been at work on a railroad to the eastward."

"But, had they?"

"I can't say, Cody, I never gave the matter a thought."

"Nevertheless, it's a question of some consequence," insinuated the scout, "for the whole crowd is just as likely to have come direct from the camp of the Ravagers!"

The commandant started at the suggestion, and Bill continued:

"How did Finklestone manage to find such favor with you?"

"Well, he showed himself very capable and energetic—a superior sort of man, in fact—and seemed devoted to his duties, reliable and

anxious to please. I naturally took some notice of him, making him a corporal, and it was not long before he told me he was the only son of a well-known English baronet, Sir Hornby Finklestone, and that liquor and bad associations had tumbled him into the pit which had led to his enlistment. He showed me letters and other authentic documents in proof of these assertions."

"Please state their nature?"

The commandant did so, specifying letters of introduction, hotel-bills, and other letters from Sir Hornby Finklestone.

"There is a baronet of that name," commented the scout, "and he has a son named Budd, or Buddington, but it's morally certain that your late orderly is not the son."

"Then how did he come by those documents?" demanded the colonel.

Quick came the reply:

"He may have taken them, while figuring as a Ravager, from the real Budd Finklestone!"

Colonel Nayler started again, and stirred uneasily in his chair, with the air of being astonished at the light he was getting.

"And so you kept advancing him, partly because of his good conduct and capacity, and partly because of his aristocratic connections?" continued the scout, quietly.

"The exact truth, Cody!"

"But events must have favored him strangely, colonel, for him to have been advanced nearly a dozen grades in five or six months."

"They did, indeed!" admitted the commandant. "Somehow the man just ahead of him was always getting out of the way. Twice at least his immediate superiors were disabled, and at least three others deserted. Besides, I advanced him several grades at once—for instance, from third corporal to second sergeant."

"Have those absences of which we were speaking ever been of any considerable duration?"

"Of course they have," was the reply. "I've given him furloughs whenever he asked for them—so reasonable would seem his wishes—and some of them were for two or three days. Then, too, he has been outside a great deal to hunt up deserters, not to speak of two or three hunts in which he took part against the Ravagers. In a word, he has been in and out freely ever since I began to promote him and trust him."

It was now the turn of Buffalo Bill to look startled and stir uneasily. Such possibilities or consequences seemed to flow from these facts and admissions that he could hardly preserve his outward calmness.

"You have made a great deal of this man, colonel?" he resumed, after a pause.

"Too much, Cody—a thousand times too much, I must admit!"

"And he has stood high in your confidence, assisting you in your campaigns against the Ravagers, and having a knowledge of your secrets?"

"Yes, especially during the last two or three months, or since everything has been going to the dogs!"

The scout moved his chair nearer to the colonel's, looking around and listening, and then resumed, in a whisper:

"Didn't Budd and his crowd turn up here just after you had been hunting the Ravagers with all your might?"

"They did—now that your query recalls the fact."

"Did it ever occur to you that this man is probably a Ravager?"

"Never!"

"And possibly that he is 'Bad Medicine' and 'Whoop-pee,' or the very King of the Ravagers?"

"The thought never occurred to me!"

"Nor that the men who enlisted with him are also Ravagers?"

"No such suspicion crossed my mind!"

"Nor that they are all here as spies and traitors—as corrupters of the garrison?" pursued the scout.

Colonel Nayler stirred again, in startled uneasiness.

"The mere suggestion of such a state of affairs here," the army commandant declared, "takes my breath away, Cody!"

"And you have never even had a suspicion that these men have smuggled themselves into the fort to oppose and nullify all your efforts for the destruction of their brotherhood, just as naturally as mice burrow in a cheese to devour it?"

"Not even a suspicion!"

"In a word, you are still unaware that your arch-enemy—the mysterious head of these Ravagers—has been living at your side, in peace and honor, while you have literally ransacked all Southwestern Colorado to find him?"

Colonel Nayler laughed hysterically, his color changing from white to scarlet.

"Come, come," he cried, "this is too much!"

"Nevertheless, such a state of things as I have suggested may be—nay, probably is—the absolute truth!" assured Buffalo Bill, with the emphasis of a profound conviction. "Look into the matter! Probe the facts! Make your connections on what has happened! As a first

step, let's have Finklestone in here, if you have no objections, and subject him to a rigorous examination, letting me take a hand in it. He knew you expected me, of course?"

The commandant assented.

"Then it can do no harm for him to have a closer view of me. Will you send for him?"

Heavy footsteps resounded in the back hall at this moment, and Corporal Dimmick again made his appearance.

"We haven't yet been able to find Ben Letts, colonel," he reported. "The boys have been to every place where he's likely to be, but it's no go!"

"You can leave Ben to me, colonel," said Buffalo Bill, in a whisper. "I can find him later!"

The commandant accordingly said to the corporal:

"Never mind Ben now, Dimmick. You needn't continue to search for him. How does Finklestone take his reduction to the ranks?"

"He has said nothing, colonel," replied the corporal, "but I think he meditates some desperate move!"

"What do the boys say?"

"Some of them say too much, colonel—so much that I have threatened to arrest them at any repetition of their conduct!"

"Indeed? Give me some examples!"

The corporal complied, and the colonel and his guest exchanged glances of comprehension.

"You were quite right, Dimmick," said Colonel Naylor, "not to let such remarks pass unnoticed. You may bring Budd into the back parlor. But first search him thoroughly, so that we may be entirely assured he has no concealed weapons about him. You and your file will remain under arms in the back hall, and be ready to appear the instant I call you, in case of trouble with the prisoner. You may also bring a gag and a pair of handcuffs with you. Comprehend?"

"I do, colonel," and Dimmick vanished.

CHAPTER V.

WHO AND WHAT IS HE?

THE colonel and his guest transferred themselves to the back parlor, which was used habitually by the commandant as his office and reception-room, it being handy for his military family.

"Sit here, please," invited the colonel, indicating a sofa. "We may as well place ourselves between the prisoner and the doors, so that he won't have the least chance to escape."

The room had two large windows at the rear, which had been stained to a height of six feet to exclude the gaze of the soldiers who were always within a few rods of it.

Zellie had not only lighted the lamps, but had kindled a lively fire, and the apartment was further illuminated by the vivid gleams which came in at the windows.

By the time the two gentlemen had arranged their line of interrogatories, the disgraced orderly was ushered into their presence.

"You can sit down, Finklestone, if you care to do so," said Colonel Naylor, indicating a chair, as Dimmick and his guard of two men retreated to the hall.

"Thank you, colonel," was the reply, in a husky voice, which was accompanied by a malignant scowl. "I prefer to remain standing."

What a picture of sullen rage and fury the traitor presented!

Never a handsome man, his visage now displayed that repulsiveness which belongs only to the most hideous passions. Physically, however, he was a model of health, strength and activity, being in his early prime, or not far from thirty.

"I made the offer out of consideration for you," continued Colonel Naylor, seating himself on the sofa beside Buffalo Bill, "and because our interview is likely to be of some duration."

"Why so?" asked the prisoner, scanning alternately the two stern faces before him. "Is there so much to be said?"

"A very great deal," answered the commandant. "We propose to give you a thorough overhauling—to turn you inside out, so to speak."

The prisoner sneered audibly.

"You'll have a good time," he retorted. "You are treating me very badly," and he raised his hand to his ear, which was considerably swollen. "I have heard a great deal about Buffalo Bill, Ben Letts, for instance, is never tired of talking about him. Well, the man arrives here, and you sit down to supper with him. I have occasion to speak to you and come to the door. Hearing voices, I pause a moment to see if my intrusion is likely to be untimely. And yet, just because of that pause, which was an act of simple discretion, you treat me as if I were a red-handed pirate!"

He folded his arms upon his broad chest, and looked as if he were the most abused man on the continent.

"That 'pause' was rather too long for this excuse to hold good," remarked Buffalo Bill, with smiling sarcasm, addressing himself to the prisoner. "You were eavesdropping, in the full sense of the term. You had been at the door more than a minute when it was opened."

"I am too truthful to deny it," returned Finklestone. "I was curious about your presence here, as I've indicated, and a remark I caught tempted me to listen to what was said about Ben Letts. But, is such an act—a mere slip in the path of duty—a sufficient excuse for treating me with this rigor?"

"Such a 'slip' is certainly a warrant for inquiring into your character and acts," replied the scout, "and such is the nature of the attentions we now propose to give you. It's not merely because you have been caught at eavesdropping once that we have entered upon this inquiry, but also because you have probably been playing this game for months. It's not merely that you are false in one particular, but also that you are probably false in all. In a word, you are accused of something more serious than eavesdropping, as Colonel Naylor will now proceed to show you!"

"Yes, Finklestone," added the colonel, "you are now an object of the gravest and most damaging suspicions. To begin with, I must frankly say that Mr. Cody thinks very badly of you!"

"Well, I don't care what he thinks about me," replied the man, glaring at the scout, "no more than I care what you think about me, Colonel Naylor. If you want war, you can have it, both of you!"

"Have a care!" warned the commandant sternly. "Whatever indulgence I may be inclined to show you on my own account, you will not be permitted to insult my guest with impunity."

The prisoner remained silent a few moments, looking angrily at his questioners and sharply exploring his surroundings.

"What do you want of me, anyhow?" he then demanded. "Of what am I accused?"

"In the first place," returned the colonel, "I require of you a civil tongue and respectful deportment. You will do well to remember that you are an enlisted man and that I am your commanding officer!"

Finklestone snapped his fingers contemptuously.

"That's what I care for 'your commanding officer!'" he muttered.

"In the second place," pursued the colonel, who seemed inclined to overlook the insolence of his prisoner for the sake of the information he was seeking, "we desire to know *who* you really are, and what was the name you wore before you appeared at this fort, and what is the real motive of your presence?"

"Oh, you do?" sneered Finklestone, continuing to glare at his questioners, while his face flushed hotly.

"Yes, we wish to know if you and the men who came here with you are Ravagers," pursued the colonel. "We want to know if you are 'Whoop-pee' and 'Bad Medicine,' and if your career at this fort is a mere episode or pendant of a different and larger career you have lived and are living elsewhere. We wish to know if your presence here is merely a hand in a daring and fiendish game you are playing. We want to know if you have been a spy and a sneak ever since the first hour of your arrival, and a traitor from the moment I made you a corporal!"

"Is that *all*, colonel?" sneered the prisoner.

"In a word," finished the commandant, "we want to know if you are the head and front of all those crimes and outrages which have disturbed the peace of Southwestern Colorado during the last eighteen months."

The face of Finklestone had grown livid as he listened, but he seemed neither surprised nor disconcerted at this long string of accusations. He even smiled with an air of mockery and defiance.

"Did you kill or shut up in some secret den the real Budd Finklestone, taking his name and papers?" continued the commandant. "Did you abduct Alice King and Sarah Gannett? Did you raid Cedar Crossing last night, while pretending to look for Jack Bossy? Have you organized the bands of cut-throats which have so long been raiding this vicinity, and some of which have been seen this very day within a few miles of us? Face to face with us, and a prisoner, with Dimmick and his guard in waiting," added the colonel, waving his hand around impressively, "the hour for the answering of all these terrible and weighty questions has now sounded. *Who and what are you?* We demand and must have an answer!"

CHAPTER VI.

HOW THE INTERVIEW ENDED.

BUDD FINKLESTONE sneered again, looking from Buffalo Bill to Colonel Naylor with savage defiance.

"You'll be a long time in getting into port on that tack, colonel," he declared, with the return of his wonted equanimity. "The man who suggested that long string of questions"—and here he inclined himself sarcastically to the scout—"had better take the contract for furnishing the answers!"

"Then you won't give us any information?" queried the colonel.

"Not a particle!"

"You won't even deny—"

"Not even that I built the Tower of Babel, if you care to accuse me of that performance," interrupted the prisoner, again carrying his hand to the ear the commandant had twisted.

"If you had treated me even rationally, not to say civilly, I should have been quite at your service, and would have made short work of the chatter this too enterprising new-comer has been pleased to associate with my name. But, since you have chosen to act in this scandalous fashion, after treating me with equally foolish partiality for a number of months, you may carry on your 'inquiry' in any way that may suit you, but you'll get no help from me. Having thus stated my position, I beg to add that I've nothing more to say to either of you on any subject whatever."

"But how easy, if you are really Budd Finklestone, and a son of Sir Hornby Finklestone," suggested Colonel Naylor—"how easy to disprove all the accusations I have advanced against you!"

"But do they need any disproval?" retorted the prisoner, with another bitter sneer. "Have you produced a particle of proof to connect me in any way with the Ravagers?"

"Well, no," admitted the colonel. "But we have merely entered upon our inquiry."

"Oh, the deuce take your inquiry, and you with it!" said Finklestone. "I expect my father here from one day to another," and a strange gleam appeared in his eyes, "and it is needless to add that his arrival will soon make trouble for you and your bison acquaintance."

The repetition of this claim of aristocratic connections annoyed Colonel Naylor considerably, inasmuch as he did not take the slightest stock in it.

"When your distinguished father appears, then," he declared, "a new order of things shall be inaugurated. In the mean time, however, a diet of bread and water for a few days may induce you to see things in a different light, even if it does not incline you to make full confession of your crimes and impostures. If not, we'll try what virtue there is in a ball and chain, with handcuffs."

"You may try what you please, colonel," responded Finklestone, with blazing eyes, "and I have no doubt you'll be just about as successful therein as you have been in your campaigns against the Ravagers! In the mean time, and until I get a chance to give your ears such a twist as you've given mine, I take pleasure in tendering you the assurance of my heartiest contempt and defiance!"

The colonel sprang to his feet with the air of a man whose patience was getting exhausted.

"You must see, Finklestone," said Buffalo Bill, arising and taking the commandant by the arm, "that such conduct as this can only do you great harm. You should hasten to answer our questions unless you wish us to put the worst possible construction upon your refusal!"

"Oh, you go West, young man, and grow up with the buffaloes!" returned the prisoner, with scornful impatience. "I don't want you to say another word to me!"

As was natural enough, the commandant had now reached the end of his patience.

"Corporal of the guard!" he shouted, turning his face toward the door.

Dimmick lost no time in making his appearance, with his file of men at his heels.

"Have you that gag and that pair of handcuffs, corporal?" asked the colonel.

The corporal produced them.

"And you may put them in use as soon as you please, colonel," exclaimed Finklestone, with furious voice and mien, as he shook his fist at the commandant. "I care no more for your threats than I should for those of an old granny, whom you so much resemble!"

"Silence!" thundered Colonel Naylor.

"Neither do I care for your Buffalo Bill, who has come here to stir you up against me, or to save your precious bacon from the Ravagers," continued Finklestone, turning a murderous gaze upon the scout. "As to all your questioning, suspicion, or what not—I scorn and defy you both!"

"Silence, I say, or I will gag you!"

"Well, I don't care for *that*, either!" returned the prisoner. "If you choose to take that course, take it, and if you will, at the same time, gag yourself, and so spare me all further chatter, I shall be duly thankful!"

"I see that I shall have to adopt stern measures with you," the officer said, "but, so be it. You have only yourself to blame for it. I'll put you in irons," and he stepped forward as if to give the order.

"You will, will you?" cried Finklestone. "It's easier said than done, Mister Martinet!"

With a single bound he was at the colonel's side, catching him by the arms, and whirling him around in such a way as to place the body of the commandant between himself and the scout, thus using him as a shield.

"That's what I care for you, Naylor, and that's what I care for your threats," he cried, jerking the colonel toward the stained windows at the rear of the room. "And with this, good-night and good-by!"

He hurled the fort commandant into the arms

of the astonished Buffalo Bill, who had sprung to his rescue, and, the next instant, a tremendous crash succeeded. By the time the scout could steady the colonel and himself upon their feet, and before he could draw a revolver, both realized what had taken place. The desperate ruffian had flung himself bodily through the sash and glass of one of the windows, and was already on his feet and bounding like a deer toward the external walls of the fort.

"Stop him! Kill him!" came in a chorus of voices from the vicinity of the guard-house.

A number of shots succeeded, two of the sentries having caught a glimpse of the fugitive, but none of them seemed to touch him—at least they did not stop him—and in a few moments more he had leaped from the top of an outer wall, at one of the angles of the fort, and vanished into the intense darkness which was now reigning.

In a word, the daring spy and traitor had made good his escape!

CHAPTER VII.

SIR HORNBY FINKLESTONE.

THE scene of wondering excitement which succeeded, as Colonel Nayler hurried outdoors, followed by Dimmick and his guard, will be readily comprehended, a dozen voices blending excitedly in an inquiry as to what had happened.

The corporal was especially chagrined at the escape of his prisoner, and was eager to dispatch half the garrison in instant pursuit.

"What! in this darkness?" queried the commandant, with a glance at the lowering heavens.

"We might at least make an effort to catch him, colonel!" ventured the corporal.

The commandant smiled half cynically.

"When you get to be a colonel, my son," he said, "you'll never order your men to make any efforts which have no reasonable chance of success. Of what use would it be to worry and weaken this garrison in hunting for that man at such a moment? To find a needle in a haystack would be an easy task in comparison."

Dimmick realized that he had allowed his zeal to outrun his discretion, and was proceeding to stammer his excuses, when the colonel waved him to his post, and turned and retraced his steps into the house, closing and locking the door behind him.

"You are right, Cody," he said, the moment he encountered the scout, who had retreated to the parlor to avoid the curious glances which had turned to the broken window. "That fellow has plenty of friends here! More than half of the men I saw out there are glad of his escape. Why is it?"

"It can hardly be because of his aristocratic father, I think," returned Buffalo Bill, with a smile. "The high estimation in which he is held must proceed from some quality peculiar to himself!"

"Evidently," assented the colonel, "but it's awkward to have such a man on my hands, and then suddenly realize that he has more friends within these walls than I have!"

"Are you going to pursue him, colonel?"

"Not to-night, if ever! The truth is," added the officer, bitterly, "I don't know *who* to send! To judge by what I've just seen, one-half of my men would sooner send that man on his way than detain him!"

"Then the first step would seem to be, colonel," suggested Buffalo Bill, "to separate the 'sheep' from the 'goats,' or, in other terms, the friends of Colonel Nayler from those of Budd Finklestone, and the sooner such a step is taken the better!"

"It's a matter I will have attended to this very night," vowed the commandant. "I'll have Dimmick, and others in whom I have complete confidence, make a report to me of all the men in the garrison who are likely to be Ravagers, as of all those who have evidently been demoralized by these reprobates. The basis of this list is of course to be had readily in the record of those who came here with Finklestone. Until such a separation of the 'sheep' from the 'goats,' Cody, has been made, as you have suggested, I think it would be an act of folly to make a detail to go in quest of the escaped prisoner. Don't you?"

"I do indeed, colonel!"

At this instant a tremendous uproar arose just outside of the main entrance of the fort—an uproar in which were blended the clatter of rapid hoofs, the shouts of sentries, the cries of a fugitive for assistance, the curses and exclamations of a band of pursuers, and a dozen or twenty shots from numerous rifles and revolvers!

"Ah! hear that?" cried Colonel Nayler, leading the way rapidly in the direction of the tumult and making a gesture to Buffalo Bill to follow him. "Perhaps they've stopped him!"

Emerging from his front door, he struck a gong suspended beside it, and immediately the sentry on duty at the gate pulled a cord which broke a bottle of inflammables over a bale of combustibles and ignited the same, on the highest point of one of the bastions nearest the entrance.

As the result of this proceeding, a bright

glare of light was instantly cast far and wide over the scene, as well without the fort as within, and the colonel and Buffalo Bill, on reaching the little door in the great gate, were able to take in at a glance the nature of the alarm which had startled them.

It was simple and yet peculiar, a fugitive of some sort having been chased to the very walls of the fort by a dozen pursuers who could only be outlaws of some kind, as they were neither citizens nor soldiers.

These pursuers were now in full retreat, having been stopped by the shots of the sentries on that side of the fort, and the light which had been so promptly cast upon the scene by the action of Colonel Nayler barely sufficed to show their general aspect and numbers ere they vanished in the direction from which they had come.

"That seems, colonel," said the scout, "like the very crowd I encountered at the fork of the road, on my way here, as I told you. They act like it, too!"

"It's the same, no doubt," returned the commandant, passing outside. "But who is the man they were pursuing, and where is he?"

"Here, colonel!" was the answer from a group of men a couple of rods away from the entrance.

The colonel advanced in that direction, the scout accompanying him.

Before them lay the figure of a man in a state of unconsciousness, his head supported by one of the several sentries who were always on duty at the entrance of the fort, to receive visitors or render any other service that might be required of them.

"What is the trouble, Heron?" asked the commandant of this sentry.

"Either his horse stopped so suddenly as to throw him, colonel," was the reply, "or else he threw himself from the saddle in such a hurry as to lose his balance and get a tumble."

A groan came from the insensible stranger.

"Let's take him to my sitting-room," proposed the commandant, and nothing more was said until this measure had been accomplished, except that the colonel gave two or three orders to the sentries and officers at the entrance to keep a sharp lookout for the pursuers, or for any renewal of the disturbance.

Seen in the light of the colonel's sitting-room, the stranger was readily made out to be a rather robust and distinguished-looking gentleman, somewhat past the prime of life, and with an aspect that would have struck a traveled observer at sight as being unmistakably English. This view was sustained by his plentiful flaxen hair and florid complexion, as also by his "mutton-chop" whiskers and his dress, which was stylish, elegant, and quiet.

The garrison doctor was quickly summoned, and Heron was sent to find the stranger's horse and take care of it.

"I see no fracture," was the report of the physician, after a careful examination, and the removal of some stains from the nostrils and temples. "He has been stunned and shaken up, but I think he'll be all right in an hour. We'll lay him on the colonel's bed and give him a dose, besides getting his feet into hot water to draw the blood away from his head and keep it in motion. Leave him to Dimmick and me, colonel, as I see you have company and are busy. Is he the man I heard coming in such a hurry?"

Colonel Nayler bowed.

"But what sort of a crowd was that pursuing him? Ravagers?"

"Evidently," answered the colonel. "At least such is the opinion of Mr. Cody, to whom I take pleasure in introducing you, Doctor Pawlett."

The informal introduction was duly acknowledged, the two gentlemen shaking hands and exchanging a few words in regard to the situation.

Dr. Pawlett had grown gray in handling all sorts of injuries resulting from violence, and the opinion he had expressed in regard to the condition of the stranger was accepted by the commandant as final.

"But, who is he?" asked the doctor, when the several measures of relief he had ordered had been duly taken.

"We haven't the least idea who he is, doctor," replied the colonel. "Possibly he may have a card or a letter upon him that will answer your question. In any case, you had better take charge of any documents and valuables he may have, including his watch and purse, until he is in condition to take care of them himself."

The doctor complied with the suggestion, but had not gone far in his investigations before he encountered several copies of an address card which read as follows:

"Sir Hornby Finklestone, The Grove, Manchester Road, Southport, Lancashire, England."

CHAPTER VIII.

BEN LETTS.

No doubt could long subsist in the face of the discoveries that succeeded.

The new-comer was provided with a great number of papers and documents, including a

letter of introduction to Colonel Nayler from his commanding general, which showed unmistakably that he was really the well-known English baronet, Sir Hornby Finklestone.

And not only did he have in his possession thousands of dollars in ready cash, but letters of credit and bills of exchange, from prominent bankers in London, in the name of Sir Hornby, for tens of thousands additional.

The colonel and Buffalo Bill could not help exchanging glances of astonishment.

"The man is certainly authentic," declared the scout. "What's more, he's a man of the best character and standing, and an oft-quoted authority on various industrial questions and discoveries. A distinguished party of English gentlemen for whom I acted as scout last summer had a great deal to say about him in connection with the geological strata of the Rockies and other scientific subjects. But how strange that such a man as your disgraced orderly should have declared to us within the hour that he expected the baronet!"

"It is indeed a puzzle," returned the commandant, who had been endeavoring to take in the sense of the letter of introduction from his general, "and it's all the more so because I read here that 'the baronet is coming your way to look up his only son and heir, who is in some great trouble!' What can it mean?"

"Certainly, not that your disgraced orderly is really the son of this gentleman," declared Buffalo Bill, in a tone of earnest conviction.

"What then?"

"It can only mean that this rascal has killed or imprisoned the real son, as a preliminary to the masquerade he has been having. Your recent suggestion to this effect seems to me very reasonable. Would it not be quite in keeping with what we know or suspect of Budd Finklestone that he should be holding Sir Hornby's son for a ransom?"

"That's the only conjecture I find reasonable, so far as we've gone," said the colonel, as another groan came from the injured and unconscious baronet. "But all speculations in such a matter are useless. We must wait until Sir Hornby has recovered his senses, and he'll tell us all about it."

"But, see here, colonel," spoke up Dr. Pawlett, at this moment, "I cannot consent to be the depository of all these moneys and valuables, not even for so short a period as evidently intervenes between the baronet's insensibility and the return of his senses. You must take charge of them."

"All right, doctor," returned the commandant. "Get them together in a neat parcel, and I'll take charge of them and lock them up in the safe, with the paymaster's money."

The speculations of the trio, as to what could possibly be the connection of the disgraced orderly with the movements of the baronet, were continued for several minutes, as they gave their best attentions to the insensible guest, but no satisfactory results were reached.

"Evidently we must depend upon the gentleman himself for our information," at length remarked Buffalo Bill, "and as it will probably be some little time before he can speak, I think I'll leave you to look through the fort with your officers, colonel, and put everything in the best possible shape, while I go and find Ben Letts and get to work with him in my own fashion."

"But can you find him, Cody?"

"Readily, colonel, I have no doubt, as I am in receipt of late advices from him. But, I'd like to get out unseen. The fire-ball has burned out, of course, but that's not enough. Is Zellie safe?"

"As our own selves, Cody!"

"Then she can put one of her old cloaks and bonnets on me," suggested the scout, "and walk with me as far as the gate."

"Excellent," was the commandant's comment. "She often goes out that way with our washwoman, who lives in the village, and no one will see anything suspicious in the performance. It will be well if you can move about unnoticed, but the task is difficult, as Budd has of course announced to all the Ravagers burrowing here that you were expected. You will of course be on your guard constantly against surprises and attacks of every nature. You will take your rifle and hat under the cloak, I suppose?"

"My rifle only, colonel," was the reply. "I have decided to leave my hat and overcoat here till my return, and will wear Zellie's cloak and bonnet during this absence. I will also borrow a second cloak and bonnet for Ben Letts, and smuggle him in here in that disguise!"

"Capital!" commented Colonel Nayler. "But you may need the countersign," he added, "or if not, it will do you no harm to have it."

He gave it in a whisper, and then hastened to summon and instruct Zellie.

The faithful woman was delighted to have such a chance of being useful, and within a few minutes, under her escort, the disguised scout had passed quietly out of the fort and beyond the gaze of any of its occupants.

"Many thanks, Zellie," he said, receiving from her a second cloak and bonnet she had provided for the use of Ben Letts. "I'll wait here a moment to see that you get in safely."

The moment Zellie had withdrawn, the scout entered upon a stroll through the village, as if desirous of making himself familiar with its features.

There was light enough, of course, in the various stores, saloons, and dwellings, to enable him to make his way without difficulty, and yet not enough—with the care he took—to show any one who he was or what he was doing.

Halting at length under the lighted window of a house standing near the street, he examined carefully a rude sketch of the village he had drawn from his pocket, taking care to keep his face in the shadow and well muffled.

"Yes, I'm right," he soliloquized. "This street to the left will take me to the La Plata trail, and there"—he touched a point on the map—"is Ben's new house."

Returning the diagram to his pocket, he walked away rapidly in the direction indicated, and was soon lost in an intense darkness, having left all the lights of the village behind him.

He was able, however, to follow the general direction of the trail, and at length—at a distance of nearly a mile from the fort—he came to a snug little frame house which stood quite by itself. He was just able to make out its outlines with the aid of the light which reached him from a lurid rift in the dark canopy of clouds above him, and a murmur of joy and relief escaped him.

This was the place he sought.

Advancing to the door he knocked lightly, but in an unwonted and peculiar fashion.

"It's me, Ben," he called, in a guarded tone, at the key-hole. "Hear me? I'm Bill!"

A front window was promptly raised a few inches.

"Yes, I hear ye, pard," came the answer. "Wait a minute!"

Then came sounds of the removal of a sort of barricade from a small front hall, and the door was drawn ajar.

"Slip in, Bill," invited a voice.

The scout complied, closing and locking the door, and found himself infolded in a pair of arms which seemed to possess muscles of steel.

"Such joy as it is to see ye again, Bill," continued the voice. "Come inside. I'll light a match, so you can see your way."

Suiting his action to the word, the occupant of the little house led the way into a small, square room, with a fire-place but no fire, advancing a chair.

"What's that disguise for?" he asked.

"I assumed it, Ben," replied Buffalo Bill, taking the burning match from him, "to avoid being recognized by the enemy, and I've brought you a similar bonnet and cloak to enable you to enter the fort with me without being noticed. Get into them."

Ben Letts hastened to do so, adding, as the flame of the match expired:

"Excuse me for not lighting a candle, Bill. I'll tell you why later. In fact, we sha'n't require any light if we're going to the fort immediately. But I must hear the news before we start, and I've something to say. Sit down."

Ben Letts was not a model of beauty from a Grecian standpoint, but he could hold his own every time in any crowd ever seen in the Rocky Mountains, he being a man of the Custer type—small, wiry, limber as lightning, and with the eye of a hawk. He had neither family nor relatives, and his life had its great desolations, but he had a faculty of being visible at the right time and in the right way, and had already been the associate of Buffalo Bill in a number of very important expeditions and missions, although his age was scarcely seven-and-twenty.

CHAPTER IX.

TROUBLE AT HAND!

"I GOT your last letter and map at Durango this noon, Ben," said Buffalo Bill, sitting down with his rifle across his knees, "and reached the fort just before dark."

"Then you've seen Colonel Naylor?"

"Yes, and Budd Finklestone, too! Let me tell you what has happened since I left the county seat."

He hastened to do so, speaking briefly of the various events we have recorded—his encounter with the lurking assassins at the fork of the roads, his arrival, the eavesdropping of Finklestone, the revelations of the colonel, their interview with the disgraced orderly, and the latter's daring escape.

"Thunder! that was like him!" was Ben's comment. "But what a close call that was for you at the forks! How can the Ravagers have got wind of your expected arrival?"

"Oh, the colonel told Finklestone, in connection with the preparations for my reception, and Finklestone sent word to one of his lieutenants to intercept me, as the easiest way of conjuring his danger."

"The rascals!" cried Ben. "But we'll make them settle, Bill! You've made up your mind, of course, to wipe them out?"

"Naturally, and all the more naturally because of that sort of conduct," assured Buffalo Bill, with a flashing eye and flushed cheek. "Since the Ravagers have chosen to begin the war, and to begin it in that dastardly fashion, they'll either have to go to the wall or I shall

That Budd Finklestone especially must be hunted to his hole and the hole driven in on him!"

"Oh, we can get him again, Bill!" declared Ben Letts, with joyous eagerness and excitement. "He has a sister in the village, a Mrs. Goggin, and will doubtless go to her house!"

"So near the fort, Ben?"

"Oh, he don't care for the fort nor for anybody in it," explained Ben Letts, "so completely has he demoralized its defenders."

"But this sister, Ben?" queried Buffalo Bill, with intense interest. "Is the woman really his sister, do you think?"

"At least they both claim that relationship," replied Ben, "and I must say that there is a decided family likeness between them."

"Then why couldn't we learn something through her about him?"

"That's just what I've been trying to do," avowed Ben. "I pretended to be smitten with her, and have been hanging around her a great deal lately, as a welcome visitor, and flatter myself that she has swallowed the bait. At any rate, she has let out a number of weighty secrets, including the fact that he's her brother!"

"But here comes in a curious complication of the mystery concerning that man," announced Buffalo Bill, and with this he proceeded to report the arrival of Sir Hornby Finklestone at the fort, and the peculiar circumstances under which it had taken place.

"Well, well," declared Ben, "that is a puzzler! But I'm sure Mrs. Goggin is really the sister of that rascal, whatever may be his other personal surroundings. I have no doubt they're brother and sister, although very few know it. In this fact is our meat. Budd likes his ease as well as any one. Besides, he was outside nearly all last night. To-night being what it is—dark as a glue-pot and a storm threatening—he will doubtless go around to his sister's and take a good snooze to make up for lost time. Oh, yes, Bill, we'll go around to the house of Mrs. Goggin in a little while, and scoop him! Have you had supper?"

"Yes, with the colonel."

"I'm almost sorry, Bill," said Ben, "I've been getting up such a set-out, including a nice roast of young buffalo. But that will come in good later."

Ben had indeed been making rather elaborate preparations for the reception of his friend and associate, and his modest table was literally covered by the good things upon it.

"As I've been writing ye, Bill," resumed Ben, "the fort's fairly swarming with Ravagers, and with men who are ready to become such. I've already 'spotted' at least twenty-five. That Finklestone is 'Whoop-pee' and 'Bad Medicine,' and such men as Tim Wiggins, Dutt Smiley, and Stubby Jobson, who enlisted with him, are his most devoted and active assistants."

"What's the present strength of the garrison?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"Nominally about three hundred. Now, twenty-five men in a garrison of three hundred would seem at first glance to be no great shakes, Bill, but these chaps are particularly daring and dangerous. They're all in the habit of having the countersign, whether they are on guard duty or not, and they have dozens of rope-ladders for lowering themselves from the walls, so that they can go out for their drinks and come in about as readily as if they were in a fashionable theater."

"But the colonel!"

"Oh, the colonel's all right, a good fellow, and a splendid man every way," assured Ben, with affectionate warmth. "He's sharp, too, as well as sound and capable. But, he made the great mistake of allowing his feelings to be enlisted by what Finklestone told him about his fine birth and breeding. In fact, the colonel has always believed him to be Sir Hornby's son. You see how easy it is to make mistakes of this kind, Bill. The colonel has trusted that fraud implicitly, and the lying impostor has made the best of his chances. He and the other Ravagers within this fort have wide and extensive connections outside, and hence they may be considered the advance-guard of a formidable army. They know I've been watching them, and are tearing mad. I didn't go to the fort to-day, Bill, for fear some of them would lay me out before your arrival."

"Is it as bad as that, Ben?"

"Bad's no name for it, Bill," was the response. "They've been watching for days for a chance to murder me!"

"The villains!" commented Buffalo Bill, under his breath. "But are they really bad enough to kill you?"

"Why not, as well as waylay you? The Ravagers all know that you and I are old friends, and that we've been in many a tight place together. I've often talked of what we've done. Then, too, they know that I've sent for you, and that the colonel asked you to come in consequence of my advice. They further know that you have come here to hunt them up and suppress them. You'll see from these few suggestions how terribly they must hate us. If we ever fall into their hands, Bill, they'll make short work of us!"

"We must take good care, then, to keep them at a distance," was the response. "Have you said anything to Colonel Naylor about the presence of Ravagers at the fort?"

"No, Bill," replied Ben. "I wasn't quite ready. I wanted more facts and proofs. Besides, I thought best not to say anything on that subject before your arrival. In fact, I was afraid to say anything. I reasoned that the villains might do something desperate if I stirred up the colonel against them. Why, they might have killed the colonel, or carried his wife off to one of their hiding-places, if I hadn't been patient and silent. They've been hanging around my lodgings in the village till I got tired of dodging them, and that's why I've bought this place with my savings and taken possession."

"It's a nice little place," said Buffalo Bill, "but it seems exposed and unprotected."

"Pity I didn't look at it in that light," returned Ben. "My idea was that it would be retired and out of the way, and my further idea was to be here a long time, and make the place our headquarters, before the Ravagers would get track of us!"

"But you have slipped up in that project, haven't you?"

"Decidedly!" acknowledged Ben. "You saw how I was barricaded? The rascals have tracked me here already, although I didn't move in till this morning, and abstained from even getting in an old woman to clean house for me. In fact, I've been expecting a visit from the Ravagers ever since dark. They're coming here to clean me out, and that's why I haven't any fire, and why I didn't want a light. A crowd of them may be here. Bill, in about another minute!"

"Indeed! But why should they be in such a hurry to visit you?"

"Oh, they evidently think they'll make a great point by getting rid of me before you and I connect. They don't know that you have already left the fort!"

"Certainly not."

"Then we shall soon see them here, as fierce as so many hungry wolves!"

"Why not act accordingly?" queried Buffalo Bill, arising. "Why not slip away to the fort without further delay?"

"And leave them to eat that roast, and burn my house afterward? Stop! An idea strikes me! I'll set a trap for them!"

Stepping to his little pantry, he brought out a bottle and stood it on the table.

"Excellent whisky," he muttered, "but it's doctored! And now let's be off!"

Striking a match, he seized his rifle and led the way to a small lean-to at the back of his house.

"As you see, Bill," he said, waving his diminutive flame over piles of wood, "I've begun getting ready for winter. Mind that snow-house. Yonder is the door. It's only bolted. The windows and doors are all shuttered within with oak planking faced with iron, and will readily stop a bullet. The fact is, I have been busy here for a good share of several days, and have taken precisely such action as I would in a howling wilderness, with Injuns and grizzlies for my neighbors!"

"You've done well," returned Buffalo Bill, as Ben's match burned out, plunging them again in darkness. "These Ravagers—Listen!"

A rush of heavy footsteps resounded, approaching from the direction of the village.

"Thunder!" whispered Ben Letts. "Here they come!"

CHAPTER X.

AFTER BEN'S SCALP.

VERY rapid although quiet was the action taken by Ben Letts to conjure the peril by which he and Buffalo Bill were now menaced.

Hastily opening the door of the lean-to, or woodshed, he pinned to the outside of it a scrap of paper he had drawn from his vest pocket.

Then he took Buffalo Bill by the arm and left the place, closing the door behind him, and walked quietly to the edge of the woods stretching away to the north and west to a point very near his dwelling.

The Ravagers being now close at hand, their noisy footsteps resounded louder than ever, but the scouts realized that no one could see a rod in such darkness as was reigning, especially in such close proximity to a great forest, and were not at all flustered by the near presence of their enemies.

In a few moments more eight men had surrounded the little house, rifle in hand, and one of them advanced to the front door, knocking loudly upon it.

The scouts divined the situation without exactly seeing it, computing the number of the new-comers by the noise they made and by the sounds of the movements of those on the side of the house nearest them.

At the spot where they had taken refuge was a rustic bench which had been a favorite place of repose for a previous owner of the premises, and the scouts seated themselves upon it, in a fine position for watching the intruders.

"Light up, Ben, and let us in," called the man at the door, after suspending his knocking,

and listening a few moments. "We are some of your old friends of Company F, and have good news for you. Let us in!"

A smile of contempt curled the lips of Ben Letts, and he stirred impatiently, his fingers toying with his rifle.

"The poor fool hardly comprehends how easy it would be for me to step that way and drop him," he whispered. "I recognize him by his voice. He's Sam Gaddley, one of Finklestone's most intimate cronies, and one of the meanest reptiles I've ever encountered!"

The man at the door began knocking again, more vigorously than before, and even made a fruitless attempt to break in.

"Hey, there! Do you hear, Ben Letts?" he cried, after waiting in vain a second time for an answer. "If you can't take a little notice of fair words, we'll try something else. Let us in, and be quick about it! Otherwise, we'll pile a load of kindling against your shanty and roast you alive in it!"

Another interval of silence succeeded—a silence broken only by the skurrying of dead leaves and the wailing of wild winds.

"He bay dut be here," suddenly ventured one of the eight men, who evidently had a bad cold.

"He was here this afternoon," said another of the sinister visitors. "I saw him cutting and splitting wood just back of the house."

"Silence, all of you!" enjoined Sam Gaddley, angrily. "Do you think I want to set up a debating club under the nose of Ben Letts as to where he is and what he's doing?"

"If he's not here, we can at least clean out his house," a third suggested.

"Ad burd ebyseeg that's dut worth carryig away," supplemented the man with a cold.

"Will you keep quiet?" growled Sam Gaddley, with increasing impatience. "Evidently I've started out at the head of a debating club or idiot asylum to capture one of the most dangerous catamounts that ever stood on two legs! Just dry up, will you, and I'll see if there's any way of getting into the house!"

Sheltering himself from the wind beside the door, he lighted a lantern he had brought with him, and entered upon a tour of the dwelling, taking careful note of everything and listening intently.

"Hey, boys!" he shouted, in joyous excitement, at the end of a few moments. "Come here!"

His followers promptly gathered around him at the door of the woodshed.

"Ben Letts has gone to the fort," he announced, holding his lantern up to the scrap of paper Ben had pinned to the door. "See what that says? 'If you get here, Bill, before I return, walk right in and make yourself comfortable.' That was intended for Buffalo Bill!"

The statement was true.

Ben had first attached the scrap of paper to his front door, early in the day, as a preliminary to a hunt.

"Yes, he's away," repeated Gaddley. "This is why no notice is taken of us. What an awful pity we've failed to get him! The cap'n was very anxious to have him killed before he and Buffalo Bill could get together."

"How careless they are!" whispered Ben, as the eight men stood grouped at the door of the lean-to and discussed their discovery, all of them more or less plainly revealed by the light of their lanterns. "We could drop them all in their tracks, and not give them the least chance at us."

"True," returned Buffalo Bill, "but we must stick to our old text, Ben, and never kill—not even such chaps as these—when we can possibly avoid it. Besides, your 'trap' is in a fair way to do the business."

It was, indeed!

The Ravagers had tried the rear door of the lean-to and opened it, looking within.

"Everything seems all right," remarked Sam Gaddley, after listening a moment with raised forefinger. "But, is it? Is Ben Letts really away? And, if gone, when will he be back?" flashing his light into the woodshed.

"Perhaps not to-night," said one; "there's no telling."

"In any case, we may as well take a look at things, now we're here," decided Gaddley. "Get in, boys, and we'll start a fire. Ben is sure to have enough to eat and drink. He'll be away for hours, if not all night."

"Led's get id," proposed the man with a cold, a little impatiently, as his comrades hesitated about entering, each waiting for somebody else to take the lead. "We can hab a dice tibe, ad bake oursebs cubstable till Bed cubs!"

The movement thus indicated had barely been entered upon, however, when a clatter of hoofs in the distance resounded upon the hearing of the Ravagers.

"What can that be?" demanded Gaddley, retracing his steps toward the front of the house, followed by his companions. "Are those scouts already coming from the fort?"

All his'ened breathlessly as the clatter of hoofs came nearer.

"No, it's only one man," added Gaddley, "and he's evidently one of us. He's coming here."

"How cad yod doh that?"

"Why, because Ben would not be mounted, and no one else would be starting out for a longer ride than this on such a night."

A few moments later the horseman rode up to the house and dismounted.

"It's only me, boys," he called, approaching the waiting group. "I got impatient and thought I'd see what you're doing. It's really essential to wipe out Ben Letts before Buffalo Bill can connect with him. Is it done?"

The questioner was Budd Finklestone!

CHAPTER XI.

READY FOR QUICK, SHARP WORK.

THE eight Ravagers who had undertaken the task of suppressing Ben Letts all hastened to answer, each in his own way, the inquiry of their leader.

Then Sam Gaddley proceeded to explain.

"No, cap'n," he said, "we haven't yet wiped out Ben Letts, for the simple reason that he's not here to be wiped. The fact is, he has gone to the fort to see Buffalo Bill."

A savage curse escaped Finklestone.

"I had begun to fear as much," he confessed, "or I wouldn't have come out, for I'm sore as a boil from that jump through old man Nayler's window. But how do you know Ben has gone to the fort?"

"In the first place, because he isn't here," replied Gaddley, "and in the second, because he has left his card behind him. See here."

He led the way to the rear of the woodshed, flourishing his lantern, and invited the attention of Finklestone to the scrap of paper Ben had left pinned to the door.

"That's all very well, as far as it goes," acknowledged Finklestone, after reading the slip. "But why was it left here, instead of at the front door, where you would naturally expect to find it?"

The concealed scouts, who continued to listen and watch, could not help smiling at the question, so well did it indicate how watchful and guarded their arch-enemy meant to be in his dealings with them.

But Sam Gaddley was not to be confused by so small a matter, and hastened to explain further.

"I can only suppose that Ben had some understanding with Buffalo Bill to this effect."

"That is indeed possible," acknowledged Finklestone, thoughtfully. "Ben would hardly care to stick such a sign as that on his front door, where it would be seen by every one who chanced to pass. Have you looked through the house?"

"Not yet, cap'n," answered Gaddley.

"No!" and Finklestone started, scanning the house and listening. "Then how do you know that Ben Letts is not here, and just in the act of poking his rifle out of that window to drop you?"

"Why, he didn't show up and answer—"

Finklestone made a gesture of impatience, unslinging his rifle.

"That's no reasoning at all, Sam," he said, uneasily. "Hasten to look through the house—you alone. The rest of us—"

He made a rapid gesture, and his followers surrounded the house in silence, with their fingers upon the triggers of their rifles.

Sam entered the house by way of the lean-to, flashing the rays of his lantern around him, and thus reached the principal room of the dwelling.

"Come here, cap'n," he suddenly called, in an excited voice, retracing his steps sufficiently to light the way. "What a feast!"

Finklestone hastened to join him, leaving his horse with one of his followers.

"You see, cap'n," resumed Gaddley, waving his hand and flashing his light over the well-filled table. "Ben has made all these preparations in expectation of having his friend here to supper, and has gone to the fort to fetch him. Finding that the colonel has got ahead of him, the couple will doubtless pass the evening with the commandant, and assist him in cooking up a plan for our total and immediate destruction."

"That is indeed quite possible," returned Finklestone. "Look at that roast! There's enough of it for half a dozen. What's in that bottle?"

Gaddley smelt and tasted.

"Whisky," he reported. "Will you try it?" "Of course not," was the answer. "The day has gone by when I can drink out of bottles left around loose in that manner. May it not be a bait?"

"It may indeed!"

"For just such fish as us?"

"I can't deny it, cap'n!"

"Then let it alone, Sam," enjoined Budd, with a wise shake of the head. "There is too loud an inquiry just now for 'Whoop-pee' and 'Bad Medicine' in a hundred different quarters for me to take any risks. Besides, there's no privation in the matter, as I'm always supplied with a little of the best!"

He drew a handsomely-mounted flask from a side-pocket, and turned a liberal dram into a tumbler.

"Try that," he said, extending the tumbler to his henchman.

"After you, cap'n," said Gaddley. "But here's another glass."

"Good. Hold it up here."

A second dram was turned out, and the two men touched glasses.

"Here's to getting square with Ben Letts and Buffalo Bill," proposed Finklestone. "May they die the death of dogs, and at our hands!"

The couple emptied their tumblers, and then Finklestone dropped into the nearest chair.

"We'll certainly give them something to think about between now and morning," he said, with savage gleam and glow, as he rubbed his sore ear. "Do you know where Mrs. Nayler is?"

"Certainly, watching with Mrs. Wayland, an old friend of her school-girl days, who has recently come here from the East!" answered Gaddley.

"Exactly! Well, Sam, don't you see how easy it is for us to take a terrible revenge upon the colonel for this twisted ear—not to speak of something else—by securing his wife and carrying her off to our retreat?"

"Good! glorious! It can be done!" was Gaddley's comment. "And without the least trouble or danger!"

"Of course it can," pursued Finklestone, his eyes glowing luridly. "Mrs. Wayland's house is close enough at one side of the village to be readily reached. Old Wescott is attending the patient, but one or two calls a day can hardly place him in our path. Presumably Mrs. Nayler is the only watcher. In a word, therefore, the prize can readily be ours!"

"Evidently," returned Gaddley, with the brevity of a man who awaits his orders.

"I'll charge you with the matter," resumed Finklestone. "You had better take with you Hank Tilkins, Dan Ringwood, and Ted Gruppel, who are all tried and true. I'll give you fifty dollars if you make a complete success of the abduction. You had better all show yourselves at once at the door, if the coast is clear, so that Mrs. Nayler will see at a glance that resistance is out of the question."

"Of course it will be well not to move too soon, or while there's much stir in the village?"

"Of course, Sam. And once Mrs. Nayler is in your hands, without noise or pursuit, you may bring her to the house of my sister, Mrs. Goggin, taking good care that you are not seen to enter."

"Will you be there on our arrival?"

"Yes, Sam. I'm going there to have a good sleep, as I've hardly closed my eyes for three nights past. I believe you comprehend everything?"

"Perfectly, cap'n."

"Then take your boys and be off, remembering not to open your head to them in anything louder than a whisper, and not even in that till you are at the scene of action. As you pass out, send Dutt and the rest to me, hitching my horse near the door."

In another minute Sam Gaddley and the men assigned him were retracing their steps toward the village, while the other four hastened to join their leader in the interior of the house.

"I propose to leave the four of you here, Dutt," said Finklestone, arising and addressing the man he regarded as the leader of the little party remaining. "And what do I leave you here for, do you suppose?"

"Why, to capture or kill Ben Letts and Buffalo Bill, when they come from the fort," answered Dutt Smiley, with a savage twinkle in his eyes, as also with the air of being pleased at being intrusted with such an important task.

"Yes, that's it," avowed Finklestone, "and I have no great choice as to whether it's kill or capture. You'll have to be guided by circumstances. To kill will probably be the surest and safest, but if you can capture the couple alive I'll gladly share a special present of a hundred dollars between you."

"Oh, we'll get them," declared Dutt Smiley, with eager mien. "We'll all watch till midnight, and then it will be two and two till morning."

Budd Finklestone reflected intently a few moments, scanning his followers, as if making an estimate of their several capacities.

"Upon the whole," he said, "you needn't make an effort to capture the scouts. Drop them suddenly the moment they get within striking distance. I will divide two hundred dollars among you if you kill them both. Let's have no more failures! Two such botches as I've had to-night are enough!"

"You refer," returned Smiley, "to the failure of Tooker to kill Buffalo Bill and capture Sir Hornby Finklestone?"

"Yes, Dutt. Think of it!" and a fierce curse escaped him. "Twelve of them posted at the forkstocatch the baronet and drop that meddling scout, and yet they let them both slip through their fingers! I had a plan for getting at least fifty thousand dollars from Sir Hornby, and I'll have it yet!"

"You will of course get him out of the fort between now and morning, cap'n?"

"Yes, Dutt—as soon as I've had a nap at my sister's and got rested. I can get him—sure!"

"But how came Tooker to lose both men—"

"Oh, I can only suppose that he and all with him think they're out for a picnic," replied Finklestone, bitterly, "and give their princi-

pal attention to eating and drinking. That's our besetting sin, you know. Let's have none of it here to-night," and he glanced anew over Ben's well-filled table. "Take a bite, if you will, but never drink out of strange bottles. On this latter point, I may as well be dead certain."

Seizing the bottle Ben had stood on the table earlier, he dashed it into the fireplace, scattering its contents in the ashes.

"You may show me out, Dutt," he added, leading the way toward the door by which he had entered. "I'll leave you now, with a final injunction to look sharp, or you'll be gobbled by the enemy before morning!"

"But when are all of us, cap'n, going to quit the fort forever?" asked Smiley, lighting his chief through the lean-to.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because Dimmick or some other snoop may discover that secret tunnel at any moment, and then what a hullabaloo! Now that Buffalo Bill has come, too—"

"Oh, you can leave me to name the hour of our departure, Dutt," interrupted Finklestone. "I'll only say now that we're going very soon!"

"To our secret retreat, of course?"

"Yes, Dutt—to the 'Quadrangle.'"

Passing out and gaining his saddle, he waved his followers adieu, and dashed away toward the village.

CHAPTER XII.

FOUR THE LESS TO FIGHT!

It was with a gloomy aspect that Dutt Smiley returned to his three associates.

"How cold it's getting!" he growled, closing the door behind him. "We shall have an early winter. What a pity, too, about that bottle of whisky!"

"Yes, ad ebberlastig shs bel!" groaned the man with a cold. "I deeded sub!"

"That cap'n's 'clean gone' on the subject of being plizen by somebody," lamented another of the Ravagers. "He wouldn't dare drink the milk of a cocoanut! Holy artichokes!"

"Has anything bit you, old Porous?"

"Jest smell o' these tumberlers!" wailed the man thus cognomened. "The cap'n and Sam had a drop together. Sech whisky, too!" and he drained a teaspoonful Finklestone had left. "This is too awful!—to drink all they want and then smash the bottle under such a flimsy pretext! What an elongated and everlasting hypocrite the cap'n is!"

The tumbler was passed around, in solemn conclave, with mutterings dire and dark, while the four Ravagers grew faint with the scent which reached them.

"Well, we can at least have a fire and warm ourselves," at length remarked Dutt Smiley, proceeding to the fireplace. "Here is plenty of wood, with nice kindlings— Moly hoses!"

"What now, Dutt?"

"A miracle! a perfect miracle!" announced Smiley, advancing his lantern into the fireplace. "That bottle struck in some ashes and shavings—"

"And isn't broken, Dutt?"

"Oh, yes—it's broken, the neck having hit the back of the chimney," explained Smiley, "but the bottom issound, and at least a third of the whisky is left in it!"

We need not record the exclamations of delight which succeeded, as the four men proceeded to divide the whisky into equal parts and swallow it.

"And now for a slice of that meat," said Smiley, taking a seat at the table and beginning to carve the fineroast Ben had provided against the arrival of his distinguished friend. "Some of you will have to find boxes and barrels to sit upon, but none of us will have to go hungry."

The four were soon as busy as the rare supply of good things before them could make them.

"Just think, boys," resumed Smiley, when he had helped his associates liberally, "in what an uncertain sort of world we're living! Little did it occur to Ben Letts, as he turned this morsel before the blaze so patiently, that it would be eaten by the hated Ravagers! Ha, ha!"

All laughed heartily, and then Dutt stepped out-doors, and looked and listened a moment, to assure himself that the scouts were still at a distance.

"Somehow—I don't feel quite right," he said as he returned to his comrades. "I think I'll lie down a minute."

He took possession of Ben's lounge, closing his eyes, and nothing more was heard from him.

The next instant Staples stopped eating, looking around upon his associates with a sort of dazed and scared air.

"There's subthig wrog," he said. "I—"

He arose and staggered to Ben's bunk, which was built solidly to the wall, and managed to deposit himself in it, when he, too, relapsed into silence.

As to the other two Ravagers, they attempted to express their surprise and compare notes, but their drowsiness increased so rapidly as to render their attempt futile, and in another minute they had become inert masses on the floor beside the table.

Then the scouts opened the door of the lean-to and looked in upon them, with smiles of a very contented description.

"I thought that's where they'd fetch up," said Buffalo Bill. "Your 'trap' has closed upon them. Did I not hear a horse in that little shed in the edge of the woods as we sat looking at the Ravagers?"

"You did, Bill—a couple of them, a work-horse and a splendid saddle thoroughbred. I've been drawing wood with the former."

"Then you have a wagon?"

"A roomy and solid 'lumber'-box—yes."

"Good. We are prepared then to give these four Ravagers a prompt change of scene."

"Yes, Bill," and Ben Letts seized the lantern of Dutt Smiley and led the way from the apartment. "We have only to hitch up and load up. There's little danger that we shall be troubled further."

Such proved to be the case, and the scouts were soon on their way to the fort with the four unconscious Ravagers thinly covered with straw occupying the body of the wagon.

Gaining admittance by giving the countersign, the scouts drove directly to the colonel's door and hastened to give him a report of all that had happened.

After a brief expression of his surprise, Colonel Naylor desired to know how long the sleepers would remain under the influence of the dose they had taken.

"Probably till morning, sir," was Ben's answer.

"And you think you'll get hold of Budd between now and then?"

"Undoubtedly, colonel. I didn't hear what he said to Sam Gaddley, as his men were around my house at the time," explained Ben, "but I did hear him say to Dutt Smiley that he was going to his sister's to have a good nap."

"And he said he could and would get hold of Sir Hornby?"

"He did, colonel."

"And hopes to get fifty thousand dollars from the baronet?"

"That's what he said, sir."

"What, then, can be the mystery between them? Unfortunately, the baronet has not yet recovered his senses. But I'll place a guard around the house to prevent Budd from getting hold of him. As to these four men, I'll put them in a casemate, under special guard. And you?"

"We must leave as soon as you have unloaded the wagon and sent it outside of the gate to us," said Ben.

A few minutes later, still disguised in Zellie's cloaks and bonnets, the scouts were on their way back to Ben's house with the horse and wagon, which were in due course returned to the places whence they had been taken.

Then they hung up their disguises in the lean-to, appearing in their proper semblance, and took a fresh departure, leaving everything secured for the night behind them.

A profound sigh escaped Ben Letts as he halted a few rods away and took a long look at the dark outlines of his little dwelling.

"We may see it again, Bill," he said, "but, in all likelihood, not until we have weathered a considerable scrimmage."

"Evidently," returned Buffalo Bill, with thoughtful brevity.

And the two friends took their way at an easy pace, and with watchful mien—occasionally pausing to look and listen—toward the retired portion of the village in which stood the house of Mrs. Goggin.

CHAPTER XIII.

GOING FOR THEIR ENEMY.

"Of course we're taking an early start," observed Ben Letts, "but it isn't necessary to sing Budd Finklestone to sleep. He drops off the moment he lies down, and, like all such men, he's not easily awakened."

"But this sister—this Mrs. Goggin," queried Buffalo Bill. "Is she good-looking?"

"Oh, anything'd pass for that in a garrison town, where an old skirt on a post is enough to arouse general enthusiasm. She can be agreeable, when she cares to be. She claims to be a widow, but I suspect Mr. Goggin to be a polite fiction."

"She has a large circle of admirers, of course?"

"A very large one, Bill, and they come in all sorts of garbs and accouterments, so that I've seen half a dozen rifles stacked in her umbrella-stand at once. She is not likely to recognize you from any picture or description she has received, but still you had better remain outside until I give you the word to enter."

"Shall we find a crowd there, do you think?"

"Hardly, at this hour, and on such a threatening night as this," answered Ben, glancing inquiringly at the dark sky. "I may find two or three soldiers or teamsters there, as is generally the case, but she'll soon get rid of them, when I tell her that I have very important news for her and must see her alone."

"But she must know you are an enemy of the Ravagers, Ben, and that her brother is trying to kill you."

"No, Bill," replied Ben, "for the simple rea-

son that she does not know me as Ben Letts, but as 'Captain Hickman.' I always slip on a certain wig and beard just before I reach her house, and I'll do so now."

He suited the action to the word.

"There! I'm now 'Captain Hickman,' Bill," he resumed, in a changed voice, he being able to assume several, every one of which was quite distinct from his natural mode of speech. "The need arising, Bill, you can figure as my brother."

"Has Budd seen you in this character?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"Naturally not," replied Ben. "I've been here as 'Hickman' only when I knew Budd was busy elsewhere."

"But does Mrs. Goggin always receive you?"

"Certainly, and every one else who pulls her door-bell," was Ben's reply. "In fact," and he smiled audibly, "she's entitled to be called the Great Receiver!"

The situation thus presented requires a few words of explanation.

It had become an open secret to Ben Letts, as to a few others, that Budd Finklestone and his sister had been engaged ever since their appearance on the scene, six months before, in the moral undermining of the garrison of Fort Harris, in some secret interest which had as yet been scarcely more than suggested.

He, *within*, while passing rapidly through all the grades of a non-commissioned officer, had been brought into more or less close relations with the men in the fort, and had devoted himself zealously to the task of corrupting them.

She, *without*, had kept open house at the expense of her brother, receiving and entertaining all of his comrades who cared to call, and exercising all her arts and fascinations upon them, to the same general end as her brother.

To such an extent had these machinations been carried that the discipline and efficiency of the garrison had been practically annihilated.

The men were constantly grumbling about their "poor pay" and "bad rations," their "wretched quarters" and "shoddy clothing," and their "eternal drills" and other garrison duties, and prompt and loud were their complaints against the least service of an extra or unusual character.

In fact, it is not too much to say that this work of demoralization had been carried so far that a third or one-half of the garrison would have been worthless in any necessary demonstration against either hostiles or Ravagers.

As to desertions, they had long been of almost daily occurrence, and it was no rare thing for two or three or more men to vanish together.

Very many of these desertions had been suggested and favored by Budd Finklestone and his sister, who were always willing to furnish money to this end, and not a little of all the other forms of corruption within the fort could have been traced directly to Budd's influence or pocket.

It only remains to be added that Colonel Naylor and his staff—up to the hour of Buffalo Bill's arrival—had no conception of the influence Mrs. Goggin and her brother had acquired over the garrison, and were not even aware that they were brother and sister.

Their relationship had been kept so secret, in fact, that Ben Letts had been perfectly warranted in telling Buffalo Bill that very few knew it.

"But of course she must be captured or silenced in some way before we can capture her brother," suggested Buffalo Bill, after a thoughtful pause. "How is this point to be managed?"

"Oh, you can leave that to me, Bill," returned Ben. "There are fair means and foul, or violence and strategy, but I'll be guided by circumstances."

"The job is a very ticklish one, Ben," warned Buffalo Bill.

"Yes—I assent to that. At the least squawk from the sister, I should have the brother on my hands, and at the least menace to his liberty he'd go through another window, sash and all. But still I can handle them!"

The couple were now at no great distance from the house of Mrs. Goggin, and accordingly ceased to talk in anything louder than a whisper.

"There! you may now drop a few rods to the rear, Bill," suggested Ben, "and keep out of sight till I have entered. You had better stand under this tree, in fact, until I come for you."

Buffalo Bill complied with the suggestion, coming to a halt beside the trunk of a fine large oak which had been left growing in front of an open lot.

Then Ben Letts resumed progress, ascending the steps of a neat frame dwelling and demanding admittance, which was promptly accorded him.

Left to himself, Buffalo Bill could not help experiencing a thrill of satisfaction at noting how completely he was lost in the darkness reigning around him.

Some fifteen minutes wore away, however, and he was beginning to get nervous about the situation of affairs, when Ben Letts came sauntering quietly out to him, taking him by the

arm, and pronouncing the one word, in a whisper:

"Come!"

A minute later, Buffalo Bill was ushered into a neatly-furnished parlor, where a woman in a handsome evening robe lay on a sofa, apparently asleep.

"I've managed her, you see," announced Ben, in a low tone, waving his hand over the motionless figure. "Fortunately I found her quite alone—"

"But her brother?"

"She says he's in the next room—the back parlor—asleep on a lounge, and I've no reason to doubt it."

"How did you reduce her to this helpless condition?" pursued Buffalo Bill, easily recognizing from the breathing of Mrs. Goggin that she was in a sound slumber.

"As I sat down with her," explained Ben, with an attentive ear toward the door, "I offered her a few lozenges resembling this one," and he exhibited one of ordinary size, then placing it in his mouth. "They were of course different, and from a special pocket made for carrying them, as also of another color," and he smiled significantly. "It was several minutes, however, before she swallowed one, she was so excited over a story I told her in my rôle of 'Captain Hickman,' to the effect that her brother and Sam Gaddley had dispatched his two most dangerous enemies, namely, Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts! You should have seen her delight!"

"I can comprehend it," said Buffalo Bill, with a smile. "She of course kissed you, as the bearer of such delightful tidings!"

"She did, I'm sorry to confess," and Ben wiped his cheek energetically.

"And she hadn't a suspicion of her 'gallant captain,' and still less that he was one of the 'dead men' he was talking about?"

"Not the slightest, Bill!"

"You've gotten to be quite a masquerader since I saw you, Ben—perhaps I should say quite a deceiver!"

"Oh, this 'Captain Hickman' is one of a dozen characters in which I've recently appeared," said Ben, complacently, "and I'm in a fair way to invent others."

"I'm glad to hear it, Ben," declared Buffalo Bill. "We shall need them all, I fear, before we're done with the Ravagers. But how long will this woman lie in this helpless condition?"

"Possibly an hour, Bill," replied Ben, "but more likely half or a quarter of that time, as she 'fell off' before she had taken half a dose."

"Then there's no time to lose! We must be getting hold of that brother!"

"Exactly, Bill! Come!"

Crossing the floor in silence, Ben Letts opened the folding-doors between the two parlors, and led the way boldly into the presence of the sleeping Ravager, whose whereabouts were plainly revealed by a lamp burning on an adjacent table. The entrance of the daring intruders did not disturb his slumbers, and they proceeded to bind him hand and foot with cords they had brought for that purpose. It was not till they gave their handiwork its final pressure that he awakened.

"Silence!" enjoined Buffalo Bill, presenting a revolver, at the very instant the Ravager opened his eyes. "Your sister can't come to you, for the reason that she is also helpless. You die at the least attempt to call for help. You can easily feel and see, Budd Finklestone, that you are our prisoner!"

The silence of Budd, like the wild glare of his eyes, attested that he comprehended the situation.

"Of course we must gag him before we can remove him to the fort," suggested Ben Letts, advancing nearer. "Perhaps—"

"Listen!" interrupted Buffalo Bill, suspending his respiration.

Heavy footsteps resounded at the entrance of the house and in the wide hall, and four men came hurrying into the front parlor—Sam Gaddley, Hank Tilkins, and their associates—the two former bearing between them a half-fainting woman!

At sight of them, as he looked out of the back room, Ben Letts looked as if he found himself on the borders of hallucination.

"Thunder! they're four of the Ravagers who were at my house to kill me, Bill!" he announced, hurriedly. "Their prisoner is the colonel's wife—Mrs. Nayler! They've stolen her from the house of her sick friend to spite or paralyze the colonel!"

A wild cry for help came from Finklestone, and the new-comers bounded toward him, to find themselves face to face with his captors.

"Cap'n Hickman!" cried Ted Grapple.

"Buffalo Bill!" recognized Sam Gaddley.

"Curse him! Kill them!"

"Cut me loose, boys," yelled Finklestone, struggling with his bonds, "and I'll kill them both! That pretended 'Hickman' is really Ben Letts, as you can see by his eyes!"

"Help! save me!" screamed Mrs. Nayler, who had gained her feet, after being hastily dropped by her abductors, and was watching for a chance to place herself near the scouts.

"Kill him! the blarneying toad!" shrieked Mrs. Goggin, floundering from her sofa into the midst of the noisy scene, the "dose" administered by Ben Letts having already ceased—naturally enough, with all this uproar—to enchain her senses. "Don't let him escape!"

CHAPTER XIV.

AN EXCITING ENCOUNTER.

THE noise and excitement in the scene in which they were figuring, did not in the least divert the attention of Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts from the task they had undertaken.

Out came a revolver in each hand, and the four Ravagers were covered!

Budd Finklestone groaned in dismay.

He had hoped that some one or all of his followers would act swiftly and in silence, thus getting the drop on their enemies.

"Silence, all!" exclaimed Buffalo Bill, with a lightning-like glance around. "Mrs. Nayler!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Please step into the hall and lock the front door!"

The colonel's wife hastened to comply, while the scouts changed their positions in such a way as to place themselves near Mrs. Goggin, and between her and her line of retreat.

"Now, Ravagers, take notice, one and all," continued Buffalo Bill, "that my friend and I are in command here, and don't you forget it!"

Mrs. Goggin shrieked again, dancing about as if possessed by a fury.

"Cowards!" she cried, glancing at the four Ravagers, who stood as if paralyzed. "Are you afraid of these men? Don't you intend to fight them? Shame on you!"

Ted Grapple and Dan Ringwood were somewhat swept from their base by these incitations. They were particularly sweet on Mrs. Goggin, and recognized rivals, so that her reproaches and appeals went to their very marrow. They ventured to draw their revolvers, but with that slowness and hesitancy an internal conflict so readily occasions.

Meanwhile, the scouts had exchanged glances. As we have seen, it was one of their cardinal principles not to kill when they could help it, and the glance in question said as plainly as words that they did not regard the Ravagers as sufficiently dangerous to warrant extreme measures in dealing with them.

That glance also pointed out a satisfactory way of dealing with their enemies.

As a simple matter of fact, therefore, the two Ravagers had scarcely dragged their revolvers from their pockets before their watchful adversaries had taken due action.

Crash! came a couple of furious blows from that number of swinging chairs, and Ringwood and Grapple found themselves knocked out of time—one of them in a corner, and the other wedged between a sofa and a bookcase in such a position that it looked as if one article or the other would have to be moved to let him out.

At the same instant Grapple's revolver was discharged by the concussion of his fall, and the ball grazed one of Mrs. Goggin's well-rounded arms, stinging severely.

At sight of the blood which immediately began flowing, she uttered a wild scream, which was followed by the brief exclamation:

"Oh, I'm killed!"

And then she fainted, in such an unreserved and unartistic fashion, that she sunk in a heap to the floor, becoming oblivious to all her surroundings.

How quickly these events influenced Sam Gaddley and Hank Tilkins, who had stealthily reached for their revolvers, need not be related. They hastened to remove from their attitude all cause of complaint, and even of suspicion.

"There! let's have no more of this!" ordered Buffalo Bill, as he and Ben again covered the remaining Ravagers. "A single movement—"

"Oh, don't shoot!" interrupted Sam Gaddley, with the haste of terror. "We surrender!"

"All right," returned the scout. "Pin their wings, Ben!"

The two prisoners were quickly trussed by Ben Letts, with a turn or two of cord and a knot, in that expeditious but effective style of which all first-class plainsmen have the secret.

Then they were placed in a sitting posture with their backs against the sofa aforesaid, and were honored by Ben with an admonition not to make more noise than they could readily conceal in an ounce vial.

"It appears to me," then said Ben, as he passed in review the prostrate figures of Ted Grapple and Dan Ringwood, "that the eyelids of one of these fallen braves are somewhat blinky and tremulous, as if their owner were tempted just a little to take a look at us."

"You can tell if he's conscious by sticking a pin in him," suggested Buffalo Bill.

"Excuse me, there's no need of that," exclaimed Ringwood, as Ben was about to act upon his ally's suggestion. "I'm all right again."

Opening his eyes, he gained a sitting posture.

"Glad to see it," commented Ben. "Allow

us to take you into our fold. We like to be 'all right,' too."

Ringwood protested that there was no necessity of binding him, but he was dealing with men who preferred facts to chatter, and in a few moments more he was as helpless as his companions.

"That ends the present bout," then ejaculated Ben Letts. "The victory is ours."

He drew off the wig and beard which constituted his chief claim to be known as "Captain Hickman," and thrust them into the grate with the air of a man who makes an end of a thing forever.

Remarking the victory of her friends, Mrs. Nayler returned from the hall as smiling and hopeful as she had before been terrified and depressed.

She was rather slight of frame, but in the full maturity of her forces and much harder than she looked. Without being beautiful, she was the possessor of a sweet and attractive face, and her manners were charming.

The scouts hastened to meet her, Ben Letts nudging his associate—as was his wont—to do the talking required by the occasion.

"We are delighted, Mrs. Nayler," said Buffalo Bill, inclining himself with that courtly dignity which is ever a part of his bearing, "to have had the chance of rendering you this service."

"I haven't words to thank you as I ought," Mr. Cody," returned Mrs. Nayler, offering her hand, "but I shall ever be grateful!"

All these events had passed in a few moments, but those few moments had seemed an age to Budd Finklestone, as was natural.

He had kept his mouth shut while the battle was in progress, out of sheer anxiety to see how it would end, and he shut it still tighter now because of a keen realization of the fact that any use of it would be foolish and unavailing, not to say dangerous.

"But how came you to be in the hands of these men, Mrs. Nayler?" pursued Buffalo Bill, who had known nothing, it will be remembered, of Finklestone's design to seize her. "We came here merely to capture that ruffian," and he indicated Budd, "and had no suspicion that fate would place you so strangely in our path."

This was the first intimation Mrs. Nayler had received of the disgrace which had overtaken Finklestone, and she asked for further information, which was given her.

Then she gave the desired information.

"I was watching with a sick lady outside of the fort," she began, "and was alone in the house with her. She had fallen asleep, after a long paroxysm of pain, when there came a knock on the outer door. Taking a light in my hand and carefully closing the door of communication behind me, I proceeded to answer the knock, and found these four men at the entrance."

"And they seized you?" exclaimed Buffalo Bill, involuntarily.

"Hardly that," replied the lady, "but this man," and she indicated Sam Gaddley, "reminded me that the sick lady was in a critical condition, and that any alarm or violence would be quickly followed by her death—a proposition with which I could do no less than acquiesce."

"Well?" breathed Ben Letts, excitedly, his brow corrugated with pain.

"The man then told me that he and his associates had been sent there to carry me off, out of hatred for my husband, and that they would certainly execute their purpose, even if they took me dead!"

"And so you consented to walk away quietly with them?" queried Buffalo Bill.

"I did," acknowledged Mrs. Nayler, with a sigh. "I realized that the least sound of a struggle would be the death of my friend, and so I made no attempt at resistance, or at calling for help, until I was out of hearing from her house."

"What a glorious self-sacrifice!" commented Buffalo Bill, with suppressed emotion. "And this is why everything remains so silent in that quarter?"

"Yes, that's the explanation, Mr. Cody," avowed Mrs. Nayler. "I dare say my poor friend knows nothing of what has happened, and is still sleeping as soundly as when I left her."

"What a strange affair!" cried Ben Letts. "But if this poor, sick lady is still ignorant of your absence, Mrs. Nayler, such may not be the situation of the colonel."

"True, Mr. Letts," acknowledged Mrs. Nayler, "and that is the thought which has pained me so ever since the first moment of my captivity. Oh! let's hasten to carry the news of my safety to my husband!"

"Or, better still, we'll hasten to escort you to the colonel's presence," said Ben.

"But these men?" queried the lady.

"Oh, they'll not be neglected," responded Buffalo Bill. "We'll take them with us."

CHAPTER XV.

CONTINUING TO RUN IN THE RAVAGERS.

"AND this—this woman?" asked Mrs. Nayler, with a glance at Mrs. Goggin, who had already

uttered several moans, and seemed on the eve of recovering her senses.

"We'll leave her here, as she is in her own house," replied Buffalo Bill. "Should she require assistance of any kind, she doubtless has enough of her own kind near at hand to give it."

"That's not a serious wound, I hope?"

"No, madam, a mere scratch," announced the scout, after briefly examining the wound. "The flow of blood has ceased, so that we needn't sacrifice even the few moments required to apply a bandage."

He spoke a little anxiously, conscious that callers might arrive at any moment.

"But how are we to move these fellows to the fort, Bill?" asked Ben Letts, who had been investigating the injuries of Grapple.

"In this way, Ben," was the reply. "As we came along the adjacent street I noticed an ox-cart with its pair at the 'Rancher's Saloon.' Go and hire the same for an hour of the owner, whom you will doubtless find on the premises. A dollar will tempt him, and spare us the risk of waiting long enough to go for your horse and lumber-box."

"But you, Bill—"

"Oh, I can 'hold the fort' till you get back, I reckon," assured the scout, with one of his careless smiles. "Hurry!"

A groan from Mrs. Goggin put an end to Ben's hesitation, and he vanished.

"I must say you've played your cards well, Mr. Cody," said Budd Finklestone, breaking the silence he had hitherto maintained. "Very well indeed!"

"How do you mean?" questioned Buffalo Bill, turning a scornful glance upon him. "In escaping from Tooker at the forks? In detecting your eavesdropping, and so quickly discovering that you are the chief of the Ravagers? In capturing you now? Or how?"

The prisoner flushed hotly, looking as startled as if he had seen a ghost.

"You must be Old Nick himself to have found me out so well in such a short time," he declared. "But why should you take me back to the fort? I don't see as you are to make anything by that proceeding. Can I not come to terms with you for my liberty?"

The scout raised his hand impatiently.

"You merely waste your breath," he said.

"But it's equivalent to handing me over to the gallows to return me to the fort!" protested the villain, earnestly. "There are lots of charges which can be raked together against me, now that you have furnished the clew! I may be shot or hanged!"

"That does not concern me," returned Buffalo Bill, quietly. "Should you be condemned to be shot or hanged, you'll die only because you are guilty!"

The prisoner gnashed his teeth in impotent fury, glaring at his captor.

"In any case," he resumed, "these men have had nothing to do with me, beyond the mere civilities of a casual acquaintance."

Buffalo Bill turned upon him a glance that made him quail.

"I can show you to the contrary of that assertion," he then declared. "Didn't you send these four men, and four more with them, to the house of Ben Letts to kill him? Didn't you ride out there yourself to see that the work was done before Ben could connect with me? Are not Sam Gaddley and Dutt Smiley your very particular friends, and didn't you leave the latter at Ben's house—"

"Ah, you know of that?"

"I know because I was there," announced Buffalo Bill, sternly, "and I may add that Dutt Smiley and those with him are now prisoners in a casemate of the fort!"

"But, Mr. Cody—"

"Not a word more! You are going back to the fort, and these four men are going with you, to answer for this abduction!"

At the end of a couple of minutes the rumbling of heavy wheels fell upon Buffalo Bill's hearing, and he added:

"Here comes the necessary conveyance."

By the time he had bound the fourth abductor, who was now in possession of his senses, Ben Letts returned.

"Lively now, Bill," he exclaimed, with another nervous glance at Mrs. Goggin, whose groans of returning consciousness were increasing rapidly. "Let's get these chaps out of here in about seventeen seconds!"

"Agreed, but they must be gagged first," suggested the scout. "I don't want them to have the slightest chance to be disagreeable during their brief journey."

Budd Finklestone was tempted to yell with all his might, in the hope of attracting the attention of some passing friend or confederate, but two reflections restrained him.

The first was that he was rather more likely to attract foes than friends, the latter being in a decided minority, and the second was that any further cries would probably be of no use, as those which had already been uttered, with their accompaniment of a pistol-shot, had remained entirely unnoticed, thanks to the isolated situation of his sister's residence.

He set the good example, therefore, of remain-

ing quiet and passive, while a rude gag was secured in his mouth, and the other prisoners were wise enough to do likewise.

"There! we can now be off with a fair prospect of reaching our destination undisturbed," commented the scout, when the task had been duly executed. "Ready, Ben?"

"Well, I should think so, with the tongue of that woman getting ready to lance me!" returned Ben Letts, with a grimace, as he shouldered one of the prisoners. "Two trips apiece to the cart, Bill, and the thing's done!"

The trips in question were quietly and quickly executed, and then Buffalo Bill inclined himself anew to Mrs. Nayler, offering his arm.

"Let me now escort you to the fort," he said, as Ben Letts shouldered Finklestone and took the lead in a final movement toward the entrance. "I shall not breathe freely until you are again in the colonel's care!"

"Thank you, Mr. Cody," returned Mrs. Nayler, placing her arm in the scout's, and shrinking a little from the stare which the newly-opened eyes of Mrs. Goggin bestowed upon her. "What delight it will be to get home before I'm missed!"

In a few moments more the couple were in the street and on their way to the fort by the most direct route, while Ben Letts, whip in hand, did not hesitate to give himself the most hearty exercise in his attempt to quicken the pace of the gaunt yoke of cattle of which he was the temporary proprietor.

"Here's a new sum in 'rithmetic, old pard!" he called, with joyous mien and voice, as he whacked his dull cattle vigorously. "We've taken one from four, and yet we have five remaining! See?"

And he pointed at his five helpless prisoners with an air of boundless triumph.

CHAPTER XVI.

A GLORIOUS TRIUMPH.

How busy, in the mean time, had been Colonel Nayler!

Visiting the newly arrived refugees in the casemate assigned them, he had received full details of the raid at Cedar Crossing, and been amazed and startled for the fortieth time to learn how thoroughly the wonted work of the Ravagers had been accomplished.

Then, accompanied by Captain Greyson, his officer of the day—a tall, stern-looking, but kind-hearted soldier, who was old in border life, although scarcely turned of thirty—he made a complete tour of the fort, and gave a thorough overhauling to the details for the day, endeavoring to separate the "sheep" from the "goats," as Buffalo Bill had suggested.

Despite his severe questioning, however, no Ravager was actually unearthed within the fort, and no direct clew to the presence of one was obtained.

The best he could do, therefore, for the moment, was to relieve from duty all the men who had enlisted at the same time as Finklestone, and arrange with sundry trusted officers, non-commissioned and otherwise, including Dimmick, to keep them carefully in view until further orders.

"One suggestion more, captain," he said to Captain Greyson, as the couple walked thoughtfully toward headquarters, "and that is to place a man at the entrance to watch for the return of Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts. If they bring Budd Finklestone, as they hope to do, I want them to get in quietly; and if they fail to seize him, it is still more essential that they should be able to come and go unchallenged and unwatched."

"I comprehend you, colonel," returned Captain Greyson, "and will take measures accordingly."

When the captain had gone, the colonel paid a visit to his sleeping apartment, where Dr. Pawlett, assisted by Zellie and a couple of men who had passed years in the infirmary, was giving his best attentions to Sir Horuby Finklestone, who lay in a sleep that was almost a stupor.

"I still hope he's not seriously hurt, colonel," said the doctor, in answer to a question as to the condition of his patient. "He has had the use of both his tongue and his arms, since you were here, but his speech was wild and irrational, and we could not have quieted him without a vigorous opiate. To say the least, he has had a serious time with those pursuing Ravagers."

He glanced at his watch, and added:

"Upon the whole, colonel, he will not be in any position to satisfy our curiosity concerning him before morning. I suggest, therefore, that the present moment is a good one in which to get him to bed up-stairs."

The colonel assisted in this transfer, and soon afterward proceeded uneasily to his front porch.

"How odd it seems to have that little wife of mine absent!" he ejaculated. "This is the first night she has been away from me in years! I wonder—"

His musings were interrupted by the approach of a man who had just been passed into the fort by the subaltern on duty at the entrance.

"Ah, Doctor Wescott," greeted the colonel, hastening to meet the new-comer. "What's up?"

The gentleman thus addressed could not immediately answer, but clasped his hand to his side, and sunk down upon the doorstep, panting for breath.

He was rather past his prime, and considerably inclined to obesity, besides being in a poor state of health. He was struggling, too, with an intense excitement, and had evidently come in greater haste than was good for him.

"I hope nothing is wrong, doctor," resumed the commandant, as a grave shadow appeared on his face. "Mrs. Wayland—"

"I left her sleeping peaceably," said the doctor, finding his voice. "But an event has occurred of such grave significance—"

Dr. Wescott paused again.

"In heaven's name, doctor," cried the commandant, with a start, "has anything happened to my wife?"

"Simply this, colonel, she is not at Mrs. Wayland's at this moment!"

"Not—there?" gasped the commandant, becoming really alarmed, as was shown by his changing features.

"No, sir. I expected an important change to-night in the condition of the patient, and arranged to call rather late in the evening. Mrs. Nayler did not answer my guarded knock, as I expected, and I entered unbidden. The patient was sleeping quietly, as I said, but of Mrs. Nayler—not a trace!"

The commandant reeled, grasping at a post of the porch and trembling like a leaf.

But he was quick to recover his habitual self-control.

"She—she must have stepped to a neighbor's for some herb or for some information or assistance," he said, catching at the first straw which presented itself to him.

"That was my first idea," said Dr. Wescott, struggling to his feet, "but on inquiring at the nearest neighbor's, I learned that Mrs. Nayler had walked away in company with four strange men!"

"Four—strange—men?" repeated Colonel Nayler, while every trace of color left his face. "Without noise? Without resistance?"

The physician bowed his head in silence.

"But why? and whither?"

"Heaven only knows!" groaned the doctor. "I searched quietly a few moments, and then thought I had better come to you, colonel!"

"Oh, man! why didn't you come sooner?" exclaimed the commandant. "Some horrible plot is in progress! Either Finklestone himself or some of his allies have seized my poor wife! But I'll send out a prompt alarm with bell and cannon!"

"Not yet, colonel," pleaded the physician, with all the dignity of his profession and his gray hairs, as he laid his hand restrainingly on the commandant's arm. "We are not yet sure that anything is wrong about the four men! Mrs. Nayler may be in no trouble or danger! But my patient, colonel—"

"Well, what of your patient?"

"She will die, colonel—quickly! inevitably!—at the least alarm!"

"And—and my wife knew this?"

"Certainly! I warned her!"

"Oh, my God! Then she is indeed lost!" cried the commandant. "Sweet, brave soul! She has sacrificed herself that Mrs. Wayland might live! Oh, pitying Heaven! I—"

He paused in wild amaze.

The great gate had opened almost in silence, and into the gap thus disclosed between the darkness without and the gleaming of lights within had advanced a yoke of oxen and a rude cart, and on this cart stood three figures which rapidly took such semblance that they could not be mistaken!

Yes! they were Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts, and the gracefully swaying figure between them, with a hand poised on each, was Mrs. Nayler!

The commandant seemed to pass from death to life at the sight.

"See! see! old friend!" he cried, clinging to Dr. Wescott for support, and hardly able to maintain even an outward composure. "Is it not a glorious sight? It saves my life or my reason—or both! I live again!"

And with this he bounded toward the new-comers with such a light and rapid step that it reminded Mrs. Nayler of those glad days—happily not too far distant—when he came to woo her.

CHAPTER XVII.

MRS. GOGGIN IN A NEW ROLE.

CART and cattle had now come to a halt between the great gate and the house, at a point where they were eclipsed by the latter from the view of the relief at the guard-house.

As was to have been expected, considering the lateness of the hour, very few soldiers were visible, and these few paid no particular attention to the new arrival.

"Here you are, then?" was the repressed greeting with which Colonel Nayler extended his hands to assist his wife from the cart.

"We have been very anxious about you, Neeriel!"

The very sobs with which Mrs. Nayler sunk upon his breast, clinging convulsively to him, in the natural reaction of that restoration to safety, told him a terrible story.

"You have been in great peril?" he continued, caressing her.

"Oh, such awful peril!"

She shuddered as if with a deadly chill.

"And these brave fellows rescued you?"

"Yes, John! Yes!"

Holding the trembling form of his wife to his heart, the colonel raised his hand to the lady's gallant rescuers with a quick, solemn earnestness which spoke volumes.

"I thank you, gentlemen," he said, with the simple grandeur of a meaning for which there is no adequate expression. "I owe you more than my life—the life of one of the purest and sweetest wives that ever blessed mortal!"

Then turning a swift glance upon the shrinking, wild-looking figures in the bottom of the cart, he added:

"These are the abductors, I suppose? You've taken them red-handed."

"That's the exact truth in the matter, colonel," answered Buffalo Bill. "Ben and I had the good fortune to appear at just the right time and in the right place."

"As you so often do, in fact," commented the commandant, in a voice that still vibrated with its great freight of joy. "I do not need to ask you a single question to know that something very extraordinary has happened. At what a moment you arrive, too! Just as the revelations of my old friend here, the doctor, were driving me to madness!"

"You missed me, then, did you?" questioned Mrs. Nayler, rousing herself from her husband's breast and extending her hand to Dr. Wescott.

"Just as soon as I called," replied the physician, "and in due course I learned from Mrs. Liston that you had gone away in the company of four strange men. Where did they take you?"

"To the house of Mrs. Goggin."

"Mrs. Goggin!" echoed her husband and the doctor in chorus.

"Yes. And there I was found by Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts."

"But what were they doing there?" asked Dr. Wescott.

"They had come there to seize Budd Finklestone, who is Mrs. Goggin's brother, and who was asleep in her house," explained Mrs. Nayler.

"And they succeeded?"

"We had that honor, colonel," responded Buffalo Bill, who had quietly removed the gags from the mouths of his prisoners. "And here he is!"

Until now the object of these remarks had kept his face averted from the light streaming upon him, and the colonel had not even suspected his identity, the more especially as the sides of the cart cast a dense shadow upon all of its occupants.

"Of course you're pleased to see me again, colonel, after what has occurred?" remarked the sinister plotter, with a deprecating voice and manner.

"I shall have something serious to say to you later, Finklestone," returned the commandant, with scornful severity. "For the present I am more interested in your associates than in you. Who and what are these men, Mr. Cody?"

"Ben Letts can answer this question better than I can," replied the scout. "It seems that two of them are deserters who left the fort two weeks ago and have since been hiding in the village."

"Who, Ben?"

"Sam Gaddley and Hank Tilkins!"

"So, they've turned up again, have they?" commented the commandant, as he peered curiously into the dark faces of the men named. "I am glad to see them again. And the other two? Who are they, Ben?"

"One of them is Ringwood, the fellow who was drummed out of the service two years ago, and has since been keeping a rum-hole and gambling-den, and the other is that horse-thief, Ted Grapple, who has 'done' several terms in the Penitentiary, and who has lately been a hostler at the 'Silver Tavern.'"

The commandant turned his gaze upon the two men thus unflatteringly presented.

"Do either of you wish to explain to me the scheme which has brought you into this fix?" he demanded.

"Nary explanation," answered Ted Grapple, with grim defiance.

"You won't get a word from me," declared Ringwood.

"Not a word!" assured Hank Tilkins.

"Not so much as a whine!" affirmed Sam Gaddley.

The commandant turned away in disgust and anger, but not without a visible thrill of joy that his wife had been rescued from such deadly miscreants.

"Two of them, as deserters, are subject to summary punishment by drum-head court-martial, as you are aware, gentlemen," he remarked; "but I am not inclined to exercise my

authority in this instance. Instead, I will hand the whole quartette over to the civil authorities. Is this right?"

"Entirely so, colonel," replied Dr. Wescott.

"That's the very course I was about to suggest," declared Buffalo Bill, and to this remark Ben Letts hastened to nod approval.

"In this way," added Dr. Wescott, "you'll be rid of the whole batch for many a long year to come, if not forever!"

"It is settled, then," concluded the colonel, with a sigh of relief. "They shall be tried by the civil authorities for the abduction of Mrs. Nayler. I will now consign them to the guard-house, placing them in irons and putting a strong guard over them, with loaded muskets and fixed bayonets! They will be safe there until morning, and then I will call in Justice Finch and make formal complaint to him, and he will hold the whole batch to bail and commit them in default of it, or commit them without bail—as he shall see fit. In any case, they'll go to the county jail at Durango in the morning. Permit me!"

He placed a silver whistle to his lips, blowing lightly upon it, and Corporal Dimmick instantly made his appearance.

The necessary orders were soon given, and the cart was unloaded, the prisoners being conveyed unceremoniously to their temporary prison.

"But what about this ox-team?" asked the commandant, retracing his steps from the guard-house.

"I'm to take it back to the owner, who is at the 'Rancher's Saloon,' colonel," answered Ben.

"No, I'll send a man with them."

He proceeded to do so.

"Will you come in, doctor?" he then asked, drawing the arm of his wife within his own. "At least for a few moments, or long enough to take a glass of wine?"

"No, thank you, colonel," was the reply. "I must hurry back to my patient. I am afraid she has waked up already. Of course I must find another watcher for her, under the circumstances!"

"That is only too evident," responded the commandant, with an involuntary shudder. "I would not let my wife go back there to spend the night, as intended, for all the gold and silver that was ever mined!"

"You are quite right, of course," commented the doctor. "Fortunately I shall be able to secure Mrs. Liston or some other neighbor. In fact, Mrs. Liston may be installed there already, as I made a request to that effect. Good-night, all!"

And the doctor shook hastily the various hands offered him, including that of Buffalo Bill—to whom he had been introduced while the prisoners were being transferred to the guard-house—and then took his departure.

"And of course, Mr. Cody, you and Ben will not leave the fort again to-night," said the commandant, turning to the scouts, with his most earnest and thoughtful manner. "To begin with, you've had enough of travel and fatigue for one day, and it is quite possible that we may prevail upon one of the prisoners to tell all he knows in the morning, in which case we shall learn many a fact you ought to know before you turn your attention elsewhere. Am I not right?"

"I cannot deny the fact, colonel," replied Buffalo Bill, "and so we'll remain here till further advice, with the understanding, however, that Ben and I shall be free, if we so elect, to pass a portion of the night at his cottage or in the village."

"Of course! of course!" assented the commandant eagerly. "I wish you to be perfectly free in all your plans and arrangements. But come, come, both of you! This chill in the air is getting too sharp for any of us to be standing around the lawn in this fashion, and especially for this little woman! Let's get under cover!"

He led the way to the front door, and in a few moments more the group had vanished into the dwelling.

But they did not withdraw unnoticed.

For several minutes a concealed intruder had been peering at them from an adjacent clump of flowering shrubs, with an air of such desperate malignancy and determination that they would have been startled had they seen it.

This intruder was dressed in the uniform of a soldier, including a blue overcoat, but on one or two occasions, when this outer garment blew open, a glimpse was afforded of a figure that must have inevitably been recognized as that of a woman.

In a word, the intruder was the sister of Budd Finklestone—Mrs. Goggin—and it could have been seen at a glance by her mien that she was there for some daring and desperate purpose.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WAY OF ESCAPE OPENED.

THE rescue of her brother was of course the motive underlying Mrs. Goggin's intrusion.

This purpose was apparent in her every look and action—in her stealthy movements, as in her wild, feverish glances.

After a brief survey of her surroundings, she smiled sarcastically, bestowing a final glance upon the door through which Colonel Wescott and

his wife had vanished with Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts.

"That poor colonel!" she sneered, inwardly. "He thinks everything'll be lovely, now that those scouts are taking a hand in the game! But Dorus can be got out of here, and he shall be, with all the friends we have here!"

How she watched and listened, moving about uneasily, as if to invoke the assistance she needed!

"As to their grand hunt for the Ravagers," she muttered, "those scouts will find they're in an up-hill business. We're too well burrowed for the first mole which happens to pass to unearth us. Oh, that colonel and his scouts'll soon be wiser!"

Turning away, in a silence which showed that her feet were muffled, she sauntered along a flower-bordered and neatly-kept walk until she could look around a rear corner of the colonel's residence toward the guard-house, the fire in front of it, and the relief around the fire, some of them warming their hands, others their feet, and still others adding fuel or fallen or detached embers.

This fire had been a feature of the scene for several days, the wood costing nothing, and the soldiers willingly cutting and bringing it for the sake of the warmth and the light.

Halting just within the shadow cast by the house, and in a position to see almost everything within the circle of illumination without being herself seen, Mrs. Goggin struck a match on her sleeve and lighted a pipe quite in the style of an old smoker.

Then she took in all the features of the scene, finishing with a glance into the dark, lowering sky—which seemed all the darker in such close contrast with the flames—and asking herself if it were likely to rain before morning.

Her aspect at that moment, like her attitude, was almost statuesque.

She wasn't even nervous.

What had she to fear?

Even if her presence should be detected, the fact of her being in male attire—in a soldier's uniform, as mentioned—could only be regarded as a very natural piece of feminine indiscretion.

The very worst, then, she had to apprehend, was expulsion.

No one could force her to tell how she gained admittance, or what was the motive of her intrusion.

Besides, was not the situation of her brother a warrant and an excuse for all she was doing?

She was standing at the point mentioned, exploring her surroundings with a sinister intentness, with the aid of the bright light of the fire in front of the guard-house, when a man in the uniform of a private came from the vicinity of the fire, advancing toward her with such directness as to give her a start.

"I thought I couldn't be mistaken, Dollie," he greeted, with a pleased air, halting in front of her. "What means this masquerade?"

"Hush! Do not betray me, Josh!" returned the woman, hurriedly, making a pretense of smoking.

"I understand! You're playing a game."

"Yes, Josh."

"How did you get in?"

"One of the 'boys' pulled me up the wall near the post. It's needless to say that I am here for a purpose, namely, to see if I have any friends."

"Can you doubt it, my dear girl?" queried the new-comer, with a reproachful air. "Rest assured that we're all your friends, and also your admirers. But I see what you are driving at. The grand question with you now is, How can the cap'n be rescued, or make his escape?"

"Yes, yes! Can you help me?"

"I can and I will! It's true, is it, that Mrs. Nayler has been rescued and brought back?"

"Only too true, Josh. That was Buffalo Bill's work, as sudden as unexpected."

"What a pity! But we'll get her again!"

The fellow glanced around sharply, to be sure that no one was looking or listening, and then added, in a whisper:

"I've the best of news for you! I'm one of the six men who have been placed as a special guard over the prisoners, and you know what sort of a keeper I'll make, don't you?"

"I do, indeed! But the other five?"

"They are as much like me as peas in the same pod. In a word, they are Ravagers."

"What joy!" murmured Mrs. Goggin, with the keenest relief. "I'm delighted to hear my brother is in such good hands. And you will all stand by him?"

"To a man! We're bound to get him out of here, if only for your sake."

He looked at her in fond admiration.

He was handsome and robust, with a rollicking disposition, but selfish and unscrupulous—a type, in fact, of many of his fellows.

"I thank you so much, Josh," she said, with a long breath of relief. "I've been quite upset, this thing has come upon us so sudden. But you give me new life."

"And now for a nice little secret that will make your heart flutter," said Josh, in a barely audible voice. "The way of escape is already open!"

"Really, Josh?"

"It is!"

He glanced around again keenly, listening a few moments, and then resumed:

"Within a few days past the boys have made a secret tunnel under the rear wall of the guard-house. The work was done at odd times, the most of it by men who enlisted at the same time as your brother, and the existence of this subterranean passage is still a secret to everybody except those who made it."

"But how could it be made so secretly?"

"Oh, easily, with two or three working quietly, and as many more on the watch. The dirt was carried off with that of the well the colonel has been sinking."

"Why was it made, Josh?"

"First, to let in whisky to any of us Ravagers who might get into limbo. Second, to let any of us out, the need arising."

"And the colonel and his dear Dimmick knew nothing about it?"

"No. Why should he? It's on the opposite side from that he's always watching from those rear windows."

"But I should think it would be easily discovered," said Mrs. Goggin.

"There's little danger of that," assured Josh. "The inside end of the tunnel is under an immense army chest, and is also concealed by the large quantities of straw with which the floor of the guard-house is always covered. The outer end is masked by piles of wood which extend to one of the covered ways, and hence escape will be easy and safe!"

"But are not the prisoners ironed and handcuffed?" asked Mrs. Goggin anxiously.

"Oh, yes," replied Josh, "but there are duplicate keys," and he slapped his pockets significantly. "I'm prepared to set all the prisoners free at any desired moment. The 'King of the Ravagers' is not to be so easily 'jugged' as the colonel imagines!"

CHAPTER XIX.

PREPARED FOR FRIENDS OR FOES!

"How nice, Josh! How fortunate!" was the comment of Mrs. Goggin upon the communications of her corrupt admirer. "That tunnel'll be just as useful for my brother's escape as if made on purpose!"

"The idea of it came from the cap'n," said Josh, "and I dare say it entered into his plans and intentions, or rather into his precautions. Have you the countersign for the night, Dolly?"

"As usual," replied the disguised woman, smilingly, "but I hardly expect to need it. I have too many friends among the sentries to even be challenged. Can I utilize that tunnel to reach my brother?"

"Certainly, and that's what you ought to do," advised Josh, "for this disguise of yours is no good except in the dark where nobody can see you! You'll always pass a thousand times more readily for a pretty, charming girl than for a soldier!"

"You're a good fellow, Josh Reader," declared Mrs. Goggin, with a flush which attested how much the compliment gratified her. "Will you have a drink?"

"With pleasure."

Mrs. Goggin produced a bottle from the right-hand pocket of her overcoat, which seemed of a very capacious nature, inasmuch as the bottle couldn't have contained less than two quarts, and her friend and ally took a liberal dram from it, expressing his appreciation and his thanks.

"Tell me how to reach that tunnel from here, Josh," then requested the fair schemer, returning the bottle to her pocket.

Josh Reader proceeded to do so in brief terms, adding:

"You've been here often enough, secretly or otherwise, to know the fort thoroughly?"

"Oh, yes."

"You're not afraid, I see," said Reader, chucking her familiarly under the chin.

"Why should I be? At least every other man I may encounter wouldn't hesitate a moment about doing me a favor."

"That's true," said Josh. "You've won all our hearts, and so has the cap'n. But I must go now. I'm after overcoats for the prisoners, who complain of being cold."

"What! with that big fire in front of them?"

"Oh, that don't warm much into the guard-house," explained Reader. "But of course the cold is only a pretense. What the prisoners really want is to have the overcoats in readiness for their departure."

"Can they really leave to-night, do you think?" asked the woman, breathlessly.

"Undoubtedly, and better to-night than later!" declared Josh. "We shall go as soon as everything gets quiet—probably somewhere between midnight and two o'clock!"

"Shall you go, too?"

"I shall. The presence of Buffalo Bill here at this time can have only one explanation, and that is that Colonel Naylor has charged him with the task of hunting up those mysterious prowlers who have long disturbed the peace of the country."

"And you don't propose to do much service against the Ravagers, Josh?"

"Not if I know it," replied Josh, "and there are many more like me within these walls. The cap'n told me just now that he has sent for Little Elk to meet him at the secret camp, and that they're going to make a great strike together. Of course I'm going with them, as are all the rest of us."

"I'm glad to hear it, Josh," said Mrs. Goggin, smiling sweetly upon him. "You'll see me again soon at the guard-house, I suppose, and assist us in laying out our plans for getting away?"

"Oh, yes. I'll be there in five minutes."

And with this assurance Josh Reader resumed his way toward his quarters.

As Mrs. Goggin stood motionless, reflecting briefly as to her further proceedings, she saw a man approaching whose bearing was quite different from that of his predecessor.

He was a fourth corporal of one of the companies, who had been rapidly advanced, and who had fallen into the habit of giving himself airs of importance that none of his superiors would have thought of assuming.

"Who are you?" he asked, bluntly, halting directly in front of Mrs. Goggin and taking her by the sleeve.

"A new recruit, if it's any of your business," she answered, assuming a masculine voice.

"Oh, that's it. I thought I hadn't seen you before. Would you like a bit of fun?"

"Of what sort?"

"To watch that guard-house during the next hour or two."

"And why, if you please?"

"Because there's going to be music there soon, if I'm not greatly mistaken."

"Indeed? Of what sort? Is the band coming out?"

"Oh, don't be so foolish! That Finklestone and his crowd are cooking up some plan of escape."

"You think so?"

"I know it! I've seen 'em hobnobbing with their guards."

"Well, it's none of our business, is it, since we're off duty?"

"It may not be yours, greeny, but I propose to make it mine. Somebody will have that orderly's place to-morrow, and why shouldn't it be mine, if I could detect a conspiracy to free the prisoners?"

"True—there is something in that. You will watch, then?"

"Yes, if you will keep me company. It's ticklish business to hang around that guard-house just now alone. Any of those chaps'd kill me at sight if they were caught in an attempt at escape."

"I see! And so you want me to watch with you? Take a drink, and I will think it over a moment."

The bottle came from the left-hand pocket this time, and it was scarcely more than half as large as the other.

"Thanks. That's very nice," said the man, wiping his mouth. "Will you come with me?"

"I would, if I had a revolver."

"Well, I can get you one," volunteered the corporal. "Of course we don't want to go fooling around that crowd unarmed."

He reflected a moment, adding:

"I want to get a bite and bundle up a little. You won't mind remaining here a few minutes?"

"Of course not."

"But you had better step back a little more into the shadow of the house, so no one'll see you while I'm gone."

"All right," said Mrs. Goggin, complying with the suggestion. "Won't you have another drop?"

"I don't mind, as I've been watching already till I've got a chill."

Joining the temptress in the shadow, the corporal took a second drink, again expressing his thanks, and adding a few cautions and suggestions.

"Funny, isn't it?" he then queried, striking an attitude of astonishment.

"What's funny?"

"Why, that they're putting out that fire! Are they pouring water on it? How fast it's getting dark! Ugh! How cold, too!" and he shivered violently. "What! all out! I—"

He sunk down at the feet of Mrs. Goggin with a few inarticulate exclamations, and lay as if dead.

A scornful smile curled the full lips of the disguised woman, as she quietly restored the bottle to her pocket.

"It's not much watching you'll do to-night, my friend," she muttered. "The biggest guns in this fort are powerless to disturb you before morning!"

She broke off a few of the flowering shrubs near her and tossed them upon the motionless figure, thus concealing it from casual observation.

"What a lucky escape for us!" she could not help saying under her breath, as she bent another wary glance around. "How fortunate that he applied to me instead of to another! The rascal is decidedly clever! If he can see so much, why should that Corporal Dimmick be ignorant of what we're doing? Why should

Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts fail to detect us and stop us? We must be shy and secret, or we shall fail!"

She lighted her pipe again, and sauntered away in the direction of the covered way to which Josh had alluded, keeping a furtive and keen watch of everything, and displaying an outward calmness she was far from feeling.

Two men looked after her, exchanging glances.

They were seated at an open window of the second story of the house, and had witnessed the preceding interviews, overhearing all that was said, and seeing all that was done.

These two men were Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts.

CHAPTER XX.

ALL READY TO FLY.

As is generally the case with small forts and camps, the guard-house of Fort Harris was identical with its prison.

In other terms, about half of the building which had originally been devoted to the convenience of the guard—a building some twenty feet by thirty, and composed of logs a foot square—had been partitioned off and set apart for the confinement and safe-keeping of prisoners, and more than once in the history of the fort had it been crowded, either by red-skins who had been caught off their reservations, or by soldiers who had been guilty of some breach of duty.

The light of the fire of which we have spoken repeatedly shone directly into the doors of the two divisions of the structure, showing that there was very little difference between them.

Both, in fact, were without furniture of any sort, and the only attempt made to give them an air of habitability—even to the rude eyes of a soldier—consisted in covering the bare earthen floor with a thick layer of wheat or rye straw, and renewing the same often.

If Colonel Naylor, without betraying his presence, could have looked into that portion of his guard-house which was used as a prison, he would have seen—a few minutes subsequent to the interview of Mrs. Goggin with Josh Reader—such a remarkable state of things that he would have felt compelled to ask himself if he were awake or dreaming.

To begin with, he could not have failed to notice that his five prisoners were as serene and happy as ever, and not in the least cast down by their confinement or by the prospect of imprisonment to which Dr. Wescott had alluded.

To the contrary, they were having a "good time," as they understood the phrase.

They were not only smoking and drinking, but a substantial supper had been served them, and they had done it ample justice.

Budd Finklestone sat with his back against the great army chest of which Josh Reader had spoken, and often turned his gaze toward the loose straw at one end of it as if expecting some pleasant manifestation from that quarter.

He had been handcuffed and heavily ironed, but the fact had in nowise interfered with his wonted equanimity.

In the middle of the guard-house crouched the four abductors of Mrs. Naylor, in the act of playing a game of cards, with the aid of a large square box which had been turned bottom up between them.

They played under some disadvantage, to be sure, seeing that they had been ornamented in the same way as their leader, but they seemed to be enjoying their game, and at times to become really absorbed in it.

At one side of them stood a sentry, who appeared to be quite as much interested in the game as any of the players. He was, of course, armed, and his rifle was loaded and displayed its bayonet, but it seemed no more terrifying to the prisoners than to him, as he spread his fingers upon the shank and leaned heavily upon it, in that attitude which so generally characterizes the sentinel when on guard over nothing in particular.

Just inside of the entrance of the guard-house stood Josh Reader, doing duty in the same nonchalant style as his associate, with the simple difference that he was leaning upon the butt of his rifle instead of its muzzle.

As to the remaining four of these six guardsmen referred to by Josh, they were seated on the straw, with their backs to the walls, at as many different points of the interior, with their rifles reclining between their legs, and with the air of men who are quite at peace with themselves and with all their surroundings.

Outside, on benches around the fire, or near it, were a dozen men composing the relief, some of them conversing, and others walking back and forth, but none of them giving any particular attention to the guard-house or its occupants.

They had discussed the affairs of the prisoners with some interest, but had now turned their thoughts upon other matters.

"How are things out there, Josh?" suddenly asked Finklestone, with a nod in the direction of the relief.

"Well, they're all our kind save four, and I think those four are indifferent to everything save their rations."

"Where's that Dimmick?"

"He seems to be buzzing around the colonel, and has evidently taken your place."

"Where's Captain Greyson?"

"I haven't seen him for an hour, but at last accounts he was having a 'rubber' with Salton and Mix."

"Well, I know what those 'rubbers' amount to," commented Finklestone. "Those chaps are well out of the way. But why is it, Josh, that my sister does not appear? Are you sure that she understood about the tunnel?"

"Perfectly. She will be here in a minute."

A rustling of the straw at the end of the big chest caught the hearing of Finklestone.

"Sure enough," he added. "Here she is."

The next instant an opening appeared in the straw at the point indicated, and within that opening a bright pair of eyes, which outshone the lamps by which the guard-house was lighted.

"Everything is all right here," whispered Finklestone. "You can come in."

The hint was sufficient, and Mrs. Goggin ascended through the aperture, appearing to the prisoners and their keepers.

"You can talk at your ease," said Josh to the new-comer, with a smile. "All here are our kind, and Hillyer and the rest will give us timely warning if any one comes."

The disguised woman seemed a little startled to see her brother and his friends in irons, which clanked at every movement, but his smile of welcome and their evident ease of mind reassured her. She remained too nervous and preoccupied, however, to give a thought to the concealing of her identity.

"I was sure you would come," was Budd's greeting, "and Josh has reported his interview with you. What have you done since our capture?"

"I have set my house in order for a long absence," she replied, handing him the larger of her two bottles, "and have taken the liberty of ordering Jim Ransom to be in waiting at the grove with all our horses as soon as he can."

"Capital! The very thing!" cried Finklestone joyously, as he sent the bottle on its rounds among his fellows. "I was wishing you would have the forethought to do that. You comprehended, of course, that we should find means of escape?"

"Well, I hoped as much after what has been said and done," she answered, looking smilingly around upon her admirers, "but I didn't know just how it would be, now that the pinch has come!"

"We'd all die for you and the cap'n," assured Josh Reeder earnestly. "Wouldn't we, boys?"

"Yes, yes!" answered several voices in chorus.

"I thank you all heartily," returned Mrs. Goggin, with her brightest smile and sweetest voice. "But I have nevertheless been nervous, not knowing as you would be able to carry out your good intentions."

"Oh, it's all arranged," declared Finklestone. "We can get out of here at any moment. But we wish to wait until everything gets quiet for the night, so as to be absent some little time before our flight is discovered."

"I understand that, Dorus," declared Mrs. Goggin, making use of the name by which she addressed her brother habitually, "but everything is now quiet, and I am anxious to see you all get out of this hole as soon as possible. Why not go now?"

She glanced from her brother to Josh with eyes of earnest entreaty.

"Why not?" repeated Sam Gaddley, looking up from his game and throwing down his cards. "I have as much nerve as the rest of you, but I'd like to vamoose!"

"So would I," said several voices in concert.

"Let me take a look," proposed Josh Reeder, moving toward the entrance. "Our road may indeed be open!"

He stepped out and made a tour of the guard-house, coming back with a crisp and energetic manner.

"Everything is indeed strangely quiet," he reported. "I'm almost tempted to advise a start. The colonel is either busy with his guests, or he and they have retired for the night. I don't see the least necessity of taking the risks of further delay."

"Nor do I," avowed several voices in chorus.

"Then let's be off," said Josh.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SCOUTS FURTHER ENLIGHTENED.

ALL eyes turned upon Budd Finklestone in such a way as to show that no one expected to leave without his assent and permission, and he hastened to respond to that mute appeal, without the least suspicion that Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts had found their way into the tunnel, unheard and unseen, and were now concealed beyond the big army-chest, watching and listening.

"Of course, my gentle Ravagers, I comprehend your desire to be gone," said Finklestone, looking around smilingly. "It was even my intention to leave before now, for I see only too clearly that our days of usefulness hereabouts are over, and feel only too keenly that we've had

about enough of this sort of amusement. But that Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts have done us a very nasty turn in taking Mrs. Nayler away from us, and I itch all the way from my Alpha to my Omega to get square with them."

"Naturally, cap'n," assented Josh Reeder; "but can we get square with them?"

"Well, you can't 'most always tell exactly how things will eventuate till your hen comes off the eggs," replied Finklestone, "but there are plenty of good points in the situation. To begin with, we can get out of these irons about as easy as a spy eel can swallow himself. There are arms within reach; also horses. There's a sufficient sprinkling of Ravagers in all the reliefs and on all the posts to paralyze any attempt which may be made for our annihilation. The night is so dark that a lost dog would think himself fenced in by it and lie down and keep quiet. It may even rain pitchforks before morning, if the wind should go down. Under these circumstances we have no especial reason to be discouraged."

"Not if we leave, Dorus," returned Mrs. Goggin, with visible anxiety. "But here we're in terrible peril."

"Oh, we're going, sis," said Finklestone. "The only question is, just how soon? I realize that we're playing a losing game with those scouts as long as we remain in this fort. But once we catch them outside—on our own ground, so to speak—we shall not be long in getting rid of them forever. In the mean time, is there any reason why we should not hold on an hour or two, more or less, and endeavor to give our enemies our compliments before leaving, or why we shouldn't visit them in their lairs, and raise high old mischief here before we get up and dust?"

"Why shouldn't we?" demanded Josh, looking around with grim ferocity. "We might at least seize that paymaster's cash which arrived to-day, and not wait for its distribution to-morrow."

"We might even seize Mrs. Nayler again," suggested Sam Gaddley.

"And knock old man Nayler on the head," put in Ted Grupp.

"Or, better still," pursued Finklestone, "hook on to those infernal scouts and take 'em into the hills and hang 'em for the vultures to contemplate. They're the chaps I want to fry, stew, and boil! Since they've come here to chew us up, what a nice thing it'd be to make 'em our meat. Let's wait a little, boys, and ponder seriously on this subject, keeping our eyes peeled. It'll be singular enough if we don't have a chance to set up high old Chimborazo hereabouts before we take our departure."

"Nevertheless, Dorus—"

Finklestone had noticed that the face of his sister grew more serious with every word he uttered, and that brief and unfinished remonstrance was scarcely needed to tell him that she was not at all in favor of waiting.

"Well, sis?" he queried, with a smile, caressing her.

"It's neither wise nor safe to remain here a minute longer," she declared, earnestly. "Our friends are as one to a dozen or twenty. Some one of the many you have confided in may be a traitor. It wouldn't take much of a search to discover this tunnel. It may even be known to the colonel already. We shall never have another such favorable night, and never again be so ready. Your first duty is to save yourself and these friends. We must go, Dorus—now, this very instant! Unless you use this tunnel while it is open to you, you'll soon be chained to a cannon, and doomed to certain death!"

An awful murmur of approval succeeded, the face of every hearer—even Finklestone's—growing white under the influence of Mrs. Goggin's only too visible anguish, and especially her sense and logic.

"So be it, then," returned the brother, after scanning the rigid features around him. "There's a great risk in remaining, certainly. I'd like to take instant and terrible revenge upon those scouts, as I've indicated, but I agree that there are matters of greater consequence claiming our attention. Josh, you may unlock all these irons!"

"How joyfully," returned Reeder, with such excitement that his breath came pantingly, "need not be stated!"

He gave all his attention to the task in hand, and neither paused nor spoke again until the last of the five prisoners was at liberty.

"What joy!" muttered Sam Gaddley, rubbing his wrists and stretching his legs.

"Blessed moment! for which we've waited too long!" said another, with mock sentimentalism. "I wouldn't go through the last ten minutes again for ten thousand million—"

"Hold on, Ted," interrupted Finklestone, smilingly, shaking a warning finger. "Any of us would do the same thing over again for a quarter of that money! Are you all sound in limb and wind like a first-class race-horse?"

"Perfectly," affirmed Hank Tilkins.

"Never better," avowed Ted Grupp.

"Then keep quiet a moment," enjoined Finklestone. "The next thing in order is the tools!"

Proceeding to a rear corner of the apart-

ment, he turned out from under the straw enough rifles and revolvers to arm the released prisoners and his sister and himself.

"And now for a few instructions," pursued Finklestone, after a brief consultation with his sister. "The place of rendezvous is at the northeast angle of the fort, where a rope-ladder has been planted, in charge of the sentry at that point, who is one of us, and who is going away with us. You are to proceed thither singly, taking any route you please after getting clear of the tunnel, but you'll take good care to keep as much under cover as possible. Understand, all?"

A general assent was given him.

"Should you find yourselves in any danger of being stopped between here and there," continued Finklestone, "you'll have to act promptly. Not being able to fire without raising an alarm, you'll have to use the butt of your guns. Is this also understood?"

"Perfectly," answered Sam Gaddley, and his associates indicated that this also was their sentiment.

"Then I have only to add that horses await us at that first grove on the La Plata route," added Finklestone, "and that you may now help yourselves to overcoats from that pile in the corner and hold yourselves in readiness for departure."

The released men hastened to help themselves to the garments indicated.

"And now to be off," said Josh Reeder, after another inquiring glance from the guard-house. "You and Mrs. Goggin had better go first, cap'n."

"No, thank you," returned Finklestone. "My sister and I will go last. Since those scouts are within the fort, intent on discovering our secrets, it's quite possible that they may come prowling in this direction at a very awkward moment. Should such be the case," and his face glowed savagely, while his clutch tightened on a revolver he had drawn from his pocket, "I'd sooner trust myself to meet them than delegate the job to even the best of you! You and Gaddley can go first, Tilkins, the pair of you, as two will attract little more attention than one, and we'll give you a start of three minutes. You'll both bear in mind the peculiar construction of that tunnel, as it has heretofore been explained to you, and not bump your heads!"

He made a gesture of dismissal, and Sam Gaddley and Hank Tilkins vanished into the entrance of the tunnel.

CHAPTER XXII.

NOTHING TO HINDER HIM!

ALMOST holding their breath, the Ravagers listened intently to assure themselves that Sam Gaddley and Hank Tilkins were in no wise headed off or interfered with in their escape from the guard-house.

Thus three minutes passed.

"They're all right, it seems," muttered Finklestone, looking up from his watch. "They've got through safely, or we should have heard an alarm. You two can go next!"

He nodded to Dan Ringwood and Ted Grupp, who hastened to take their way through the secret tunnel as silently as phantoms.

"This was the right thing to do, after all, Dollie," whispered Finklestone, without ceasing to listen, "and I must thank you for insisting upon it. We have too much at stake to take any other course."

Mrs. Goggin pressed his hand in silence, a sigh of relief escaping her.

After a wait of a couple of minutes—for those remaining began to get nervous—Ted and Dan were followed by a couple of the recreant guards, and soon Josh Reeder was left alone with the brother and sister.

"Of course, Josh," suggested Finklestone, "you'll let Stubby know we're off, and will repeat the hint as to the action he's to take in the matter."

"I'll tell him," returned Josh, and with this he stepped out to the fire, looking across it to a bench on which sat half a dozen men who were off duty.

Among these men was one who had been observing Josh furtively a few moments, and Josh had only to raise his finger to call this man to his side.

"We're going now, Stubby," he whispered. "Don't forget to follow us in due course, as talked, and bring Tim Wiggins with you. Of course we'd like you to go with us, but we must leave a trusty friend here to bring us word of the measures which will be taken to find us!"

The man nodded understandingly.

"But perhaps we shall not go far to-night," resumed Josh, "and, in any case, you'll easily get away to-morrow and overtake us somewhere on the route, or at the Crater camp."

"I understand all that, Josh," was the response of Stubby. "But how long shall we wait before we 'discover' that prisoners and keepers have fled together?"

"Oh, not too long—say half an hour. But if you see any one else is about to discover our absence, you must give the alarm ahead of them, even if you give it within five minutes. Is everything understood?"

"To a hair, Josh."

"Then good-night and good luck!"

A brief response was made to him, and then Stubby sauntered back to his seat, while Josh returned to the brother and sister.

"I suppose we're to follow the rest now, cap'n?" he queried.

"Yes, Josh. You've heard nothing later from Dutt Smiley and those with him?"

"No, cap'n."

"They gave no sign of coming out of that sleep?"

"Not the slightest. Doctor Pawlett took a look at them, and said they'd sleep until late in the night, or possibly till morning."

Finklestone smothered a curse.

"It's hard to leave them here, and in that fix," he declared, "the more especially as I can't say just when I'll be back, if ever. You've told Brower what message to give them when they recover their senses?"

"Of course, cap'n."

"Then we must leave them to make their way to the 'Quadrangle' when they can," concluded Finklestone. "We cannot take the risk of an attempt to move them, nor can we delay here until they wake up. I'd like to get hold of those meddling scouts," he added, "as the mere fact of having them in our hands would paralyze all pursuit, and enable us to control the colonel in any possible contingency of the future, but we shall have to adjourn that pleasure, in all likelihood, till we can catch them outside of the fort."

He led the way through the tunnel, and Mrs. Goggin readily followed, her previous trips by this route having made her acquainted with it. Josh Reeder kept at their heels, and all three of them were soon at the northeast angle of the fort, where they found themselves awaited by the sentry.

"Are there any more to come, cap'n?" asked this personage, nervously, at sight of Finklestone.

"No," was the answer.

The sentry slung his rifle across his shoulders with an air of indescribable relief.

"I'm so glad!" he muttered. "The anxiety of the last few moments has been killing!"

He led the way rapidly down the rope-ladder which had enabled the preceding fugitives to lower themselves from the wall, and was as rapidly followed by Josh and the brother and sister, the latter declining assistance and making as good time as her companions.

"And now to vanish!" proposed Budd, drawing his sister's arm within his own, as his quick ear detected the prancing of impatient steeds in the distance. "We're out of that box, and the colonel and his dear scouts are none the wiser. Let's mount and be off!"

Vanish was indeed the word! In another moment the dark night had enwrapped the secret of their flight!

CHAPTER XXIII.

NOT ALL THEY SEEMED!

WITH what wild joy and relief Budd Finklestone and his friends saw that veil of darkness descend between them and their enemies, will be readily comprehended.

They had carried their point!

Not only had Finklestone subtracted himself dextrously from the Nemesis whose hand had been extended to clutch him, but the four abductors of Mrs. Nayler were also hastening to a place of safety.

After a brief but rapid walk, which was almost too much for Mrs. Goggin in her heavy and awkward garb, the last four fugitives reached a lonely grove on the La Plata trail to which their comrades had preceded them.

"You are fully decided, then, to go with us, Dollie?" suddenly asked Finklestone.

"Yes, Dorus."

"You won't wait even a few days, or until the grand clearing out and disappearance of all the friends we've left temporarily behind us?" pursued the brother.

"No, Dorus. There's no time for doing so," returned the disguised woman, "and I so much need to change! Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts are hunting us, and they'll be like the demons of the thin purple of work we have just served up to them! I cannot leave you to fight them alone. Say no more, Dorus! I can return to Fort Harris whenever I choose to do so!"

"All right, sis. We shall all be glad, of course, to have you with us."

"Here is your horse, Dollie," said Josh Reeder, leading up to her a high-spirited, prancing animal. "Unfortunately Jim Ransom did not quite comprehend that a lady was to be of the party, and the saddle has two stirrups!"

"So much the better," rejoined Mrs. Goggin, bluntly. "If I really detest that one-legged business by daylight and at an easy pace, just imagine how I must dislike it on such a dark night as this and at the pace we are likely to take!"

"You are quite right, Dollie!"

"Besides," added Mrs. Goggin, continuing to speak in her natural tone, as she accepted the

assistance of Josh to gain her saddle, "you must recollect that I am now disguised as a man, which is in itself a very good reason for wishing to ride man-fashion!"

"Is Jim Ransom here?" asked Finklestone, looking around sharply.

"Yes, cap'n," came the reply from under an adjacent tree, as the speaker began advancing toward him, "and here's your horse."

"Have you one for Reeder?"

"Certainly. Here it is."

"How many have you in all?" pursued Finklestone, leaping into the saddle.

"Fourteen."

"Then there is one for yourself?"

"Well, I should smile if there wasn't!"

"Then you had better come with us," advised Finklestone, hurriedly. "Otherwise you are likely to be arrested as an accomplice of our flight, and asked some very awkward questions as to who is your backer in the livery business, and what has become of your horses! We have left a high old carnival behind us!"

"I took stock of all that, cap'n," returned Ransom, "and came prepared to leave with you."

"Then let's be off! Is everybody mounted? Fall in! We're wasting valuable time!"

Budd glanced into the grove behind him, and was just able to distinguish the outlines of the men and horses there assembled.

Some of the horsemen—those who arrived first—had been waiting long enough for their steeds to get impatient. Others had taken the precaution to walk their horses about a little without mounting them, while still others, having less excitable horses, or exercising better control over them, had quietly awaited the completion of the party and the signal of departure, while giving careful attention to their fellows as fast as they made their appearance.

"This way, all," invited Finklestone, riding away from the grove toward the trail, with his sister beside him, "and let's have as little noise as possible."

The rest of the party rode into line by twos, Jim Ransom and the sentry bringing up the rear.

For the first half-mile the pace did not exceed a slow walk, as a gallop would have echoed to the fort.

"It's strange we do not hear any alarm behind us," then remarked Finklestone to his sister. "Jobson must have become nervous enough by this time to 'discover' our absence and report the same, as arranged, that step being absolutely necessary to clear him from suspicion."

"Perhaps Colonel Nayler will say nothing about his loss till morning," suggested Mrs. Goggin. "What good would it do him to raise an alarm, when it is so dark, and we have such a start? Would he wake the few settlers along this trail? He must reflect that we can turn off it any moment into a pathless wild, and extend our travels to California, if we choose, without nearing a house or showing ourselves to a human being. I think the colonel will 'hold his horses' and not make a fool of himself!"

"Be all that as it may," remarked Finklestone, "it's evident that he's not making noise enough just now to cover the clatter we should raise if going at a gallop. We shall have to hold to this snail's pace a little while longer, therefore, rather than run the risk of being overheard by the too attentive ears of those infernal sentries!"

"Of course, it will soon be known in what direction we've gone, Dorus?" resumed Mrs. Goggin, after a pause.

"Yes, Dollie, and of course pursuit will be made," returned Finklestone, "but we can easily reach the Mancos trail ahead of them, and it will not be difficult to throw them off afterward. As all roads lead to Rome, so all roads lead to the 'Quadrangle.' And let them not hunt us too fiercely," he added, his tone growing savage and sinister. "There is not only a large party of us, but we are well-mounted and well-armed. If they get too fierce, especially in this darkness, I'll certainly ambuscade them in some natural stronghold—such as we are constantly passing—and kill them by the dozen!"

Mrs. Goggin did not rebuke the extravagance of this language, for just then she thought of Ben Letts, and the mere thought of his masquerade as "Captain Hickman" was enough to make her vengeful.

"Are you sure we're all here, Dorus?" she suddenly asked, after two or three rapid glances behind her. "I counted but twelve just now. Are we really fourteen?"

"I can soon see," he answered.

Ordering a halt and dismounting, he handed his reins to his sister and slowly made the circuit of the whole party, at the same time inclining his ear attentively toward the fort, where all still continued quiet.

"Yes, there are fourteen of us," he reported, as he regained his saddle and resumed progress, "that is to say, Josh and his five guards, you and I, Jim Ransom and Sam Gaddley, Hank Tilkins and Ringwood, with Ted Grapple and the sentry!"

"And of course you can vouch for the whole crowd?" asked Mrs. Goggin, in a guarded tone.

"Of course I can. I know them all of old. Have you any suspicion of any one?"

"No—nothing more than an uneasiness for which I cannot account," exclaimed Mrs. Goggin. "But I didn't quite understand who that sentry is!"

"Why, he is Jim Ransom's brother—Pete Ransom—a fellow I have proved in a thousand ways, and who is as true to me as a dog to his master."

Mrs. Goggin appeared relieved.

"I suppose our adventure with Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts has made me nervous," she remarked by way of excusing the turn she had given to the conversation. "I keep thinking they may turn up again!"

"Well, there you are wrong, Dollie," assured Finklestone, with a grim chuckle. "With all their cunning and smartness, we are too much for them, ha, ha!" and his chuckle grew to a mocking laugh. "I'd like to see the faces of that couple when they hear that the guard-house is empty—the stupid fiends, the dolts, the pretended man-eaters! Ha, ha!"

In the jubilant excitement of that moment Budd struck a safety-fuse with the intention of enjoying a good cigar, as was his wont when he felt contented. The fuse sputtered and glowed furiously, not only illuminating the faces of the brother and sister, but those of the two men who rode immediately behind them, and whom they supposed to be Sam Gaddley and Hank Tilkins.

That supposition was all wrong, however.

Had Budd Finklestone or Mrs. Goggin chanced to look over their shoulders when that brilliant "lucifer" so unexpectedly illuminated their surroundings, they would have seen that the two men next behind them were Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts!

How had the scouts come there?

Having detected the intentions of the prisoners and their "keepers," as related, they had taken their measures accordingly—so well taken them, in fact, that they got the drop on Sam Gaddley and Hank Tilkins and captured them, binding them hand and foot and gagging them, at the very moment that couple descended from the wall of the northeast angle of the fort, and had taken their places!

In a word, the two scouts had smuggled themselves into the presence of Budd and his associates, under cover of darkness, and were going out with them to see whether they were bound and what they proposed to do—reserving to themselves the privilege of gathering them into the fort later!

CHAPTER XXIV.

BOUND FOR THE QUADRANGLE!

THE darkness of the night had been, of course, the first essential condition of the success of the substitution the daring scouts had undertaken.

In that intense and exceptional darkness, which seemed to increase from minute to minute as the night advanced, how easy it was to pass for the two men—Sam Gaddley and Hank Tilkins—whose places they had taken!

How easy to accompany the fugitives wherever they might go, and take due notice of all they were saying and doing!

What revelations and discoveries might not reasonably be expected!

How essential it was, in fact, to take this course, if they would be quickly and surely enlightened!

His cigar lighted to his satisfaction, Finklestone again turned his ear attentively toward the fort.

"Not a sound!" he ejaculated.

"They may listen all the more!" suggested Mrs. Goggin.

"True, sis," admitted Budd, "but there is a chance that no alarm has been given yet. Possibly there may be no discovery in the case until the guard is changed at two o'clock, or about an hour from now, but that would be almost too much to expect."

"Is Jobson safe, Dorus?"

"Safe, Dollie? If you ever get another husband that is half as safe as Stubby Jobson, you'll be extremely lucky."

The scouts repeated the name mentally, with an exchange of glances which attested that they were laying it up for future reference, while Mrs. Goggin made a gesture of impatience, as if the allusion had recalled recollections of a disagreeable nature.

"I don't want any more husbands," she declared, feelingly. "The one I had was quite sufficient for a lifetime."

"And yet you lived with him only four weeks," the brother reminded her.

"It would have been all the same, Dorus, if I had known him only four days! He was an exceedingly disagreeable creature."

"Well, I hope he won't turn up again, if such are your sentiments."

"I hope so, too—for his sake."

The exchange of these few words, which readily reached the hearing of Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts, was extremely edifying to them, making plain the cause of the woman's restless and unscrupulous state of mind.

A brief silence succeeded, and then Mrs. Gog-

gin resumed, with an air which showed she had been reviewing the situation:

"It seems almost singular that the colonel, or at least Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts didn't get track of our proposed escape."

"It does, indeed," returned Budd. "Where can have been their boasted penetration? But we must remember that they have no idea of the thorough manner in which we have honey-combed the garrison. Many of the men are far more friendly to us than they are to the officers. But what were you thinking of?"

"Why, I was simply recalling that there is a man in the fort who was sufficiently sharp to suspect the true state of things!"

"Indeed! What sort of a man?"

Mrs. Goggin described him, and Budd fidgeted in a way which showed that he recognized the description.

"You mean that wretched, meddling fourth corporal, Brottle," he declared. "Well, how did you get track of him?"

Mrs. Goggin summarized the terms in which Brottle had set forth his suspicions.

"The reptile! How did you get rid of him?"

"Oh, I gave him a couple of drinks from my smallest bottle."

"And he took kindly to it?"

"Yes. He went off like a lamb, and I covered him with bushes and left him asleep on the dark side of the colonel's house."

"That was well done, sis, and a narrow escape," commented Finklestone, thoughtfully.

"That Brottle is one of the most dangerous little scamps in the fort."

The scouts took note of the opinion.

"But we are now rid of the whole brood," pursued Finklestone, "and I must say that there is a bright as well as a dark side to the masquerade we have been having during the last few months."

"There is, indeed."

And the speaker looked back involuntarily at Josh Reeder.

"We have not only won over to our side many of the brave fellows now with us," continued Finklestone, "but we have left affairs at the fort in a very nice situation. To begin with, just think of the sort of pursuit all such fellows as Cook, Steele and Brower will make for us!"

A silvery laugh from Mrs. Goggin floated out on the air, while the scouts took into their memories the names mentioned.

"Excuse me for laughing so loud, Dorus," exclaimed Mrs. Goggin, "but I couldn't help it—it's such a ridiculous piece of nonsense to suppose that any of the 'boys' will be disagreeable to us, after the very handsome manner in which we have treated them!"

"And especially after the attentions so many of them have paid you, sis!"

"Exactly, my dear brother. Do you know how many of them I have rejected up to this date? No less than fourteen!"

Finklestone made a rapid gesture, implying that the two men immediately behind them might overhear these confidences.

"Oh, they are not among the number," admitted Mrs. Goggin, with another laugh, as she glanced archly around at them, without making any secret of what she was saying.

"And such fellows as Ben Letts are not included, I presume?" continued Finklestone.

"Oh, he never really proposed, Dorus. He 'simpered and sighed,' but he never got down to business, and never intended to."

"But are you not afraid that fourteen rejected suitors may possibly be equivalent to fourteen enemies?" asked the brother.

"Not a bit of it. I put their rejection on such delicate grounds that no fault can be found with it."

She did not continue the subject, but her brother understood her, she having pursued in these matters a regular system.

She had professed the greatest respect and esteem, with just a little love, for every one of her suitors, but had asked for time and a better acquaintance, allowing every one of them to go away with a conviction that he would eventually be the man of her choice. Had she been sowing to the whirlwind by these deceptions and coqueries? It remains to be seen.

"I merely allude to these matters now, Dorus," she soon resumed, "as an explanation of my confidence that we have nothing to fear from the garrison. In any other sense than this, talk of this sort would be foolish at this time and place. But where are we going?"

"We're bound for the 'Quadrangle,' of course," replied Finklestone, "but our route is likely to be a zigzag, if our pursuers should be too numerous and too active."

"But we shall halt by the way?" pursued Mrs. Goggin wearily.

"Yes, often enough," was the answer, accompanied by a glance of solicitude. "In fact, my intention is to take two or three days to the journey, and watch closely every move that is made behind us. Considering the poor rest we are all getting to night, we can't do better, I think, than to pass the day in repose."

"I wish we might, Dorus."

"We will," declared the brother. "My idea is to push on to the Crater Camp, where we shall be as safe as comfortable, and remain

until late to-morrow, if the enemy should not oust us. If this ride, however, is too long for you—"

"Oh, no, Dorus. Let's go to the Crater Camp. It's there that Little Elk is to meet you, isn't it?"

"Exactly," replied Finklestone, as he looked sharply behind him. "But we're far enough from that fort now, boys," he added, raising his voice, "for us to whoop'er up a little," and in a few moments more, following the example of their leader, the entire party was flying along the La Plata trail at a lively gallop.

CHAPTER XXV.

A CURIOUS HALTING-PLACE.

DARKER and darker had grown that wild, blustering September night, in the absence of the moon and stars, but several of the fugitives had been over the route, and the only effect of the gloom was to make them congratulate themselves that no one could see who they were or where they were going.

After a sharp ride of a few minutes the fugitives reached the La Plata Creek, where the trail branches, and took to the Left Fork, which they followed a couple of miles at a rattling pace without seeing anything of lights, houses or inhabitants.

At this point they forded the stream, taking care to emerge from it in as many different places as there were horsemen, and struck the trail which leads across the divide between the La Plata and the Cherry, a distance of six miles.

Another half-hour of rapid movement succeeded, almost without the exchange of a word, and the fugitives reached the east bank of the last-named river.

As far as the river itself is concerned a horse can almost leap across it at the point in question, but its banks present towering and precipitous walls, as is so often the case with rivers in the high altitudes of the Rockies, and it is no easy matter to find a gap where one can descend safely from the bluffs to the water.

But Budd Finklestone had often passed this way, at all sorts of hours and in all sorts of weather, and knew just what he was doing.

"From this point," he announced, "we must go south half a mile, in single file, following the stream. I will take the lead. Try to keep in my tracks, all of you. The idea is to conceal the fact that we are a considerable body of horsemen, and leave it to be supposed that some solitary hunter has made all these tracks by going repeatedly to his traps."

The half-mile in question was traversed at a walk, and Finklestone then led the way down a precipitous bank into the stream, facing about in it to the northward and ascending its bed nearly a quarter of a mile, or about half the distance he had followed its bank to the southward.

"The next trick," he then announced, halting a moment in the stream, "is to get out of this creek by means of that little branch abreast of me to the west. I will ascend this branch a hundred yards, and the rest of you must all take intervals within this distance, coming out singly to the right or left, as you choose, but all keeping your eyes on me and heading toward the point to which you see me advancing."

Two or three questions were asked by those who did not fully comprehend the proposed movement, and then Finklestone gave the signal for its execution.

The result was apparent as soon as all had again rallied on their leader, who had taken his stand on a gentle elevation overlooking the performance.

"There! you now know what 'throwing off pursuit' means," he declared, when his associates had all halted around him. "Here we are, and I undertake to say that no man on this earth will ever be able to say just how we came here!"

The scouts could not help exchanging glances of admiration at the cleverness with which the rascal had executed these several movements.

"Our next step," pursued Finklestone, "is to strike westward, in the direction of the Mancos. The country hereabouts has not been surveyed, nor is it inhabited, nor is there any regular travel, in the direction I'm about to take you, but I'm familiar with every foot of it, and you may be sure that I have in my mind's eye an objective point which you will find worthy of your attention."

He set the example of resuming progress, Mrs. Goggin taking her accustomed place by his side, and for nearly another hour he dashed on to the westward at an almost constant gallop, now through woods, now across plains, and now along ravines or slopes, but all the while in a darkness that made the most veteran riders tremble for the footing of their steeds.

"Here we are," at length announced Finklestone, halting and looking back on his followers. "We are three miles from the Mancos, eight from the Cherry, and seventeen from Fort Harris, and almost due west of the latter. There is not a house or a cultivated piece of ground within many miles of us, nor any other

human being than ourselves. Just ahead of us is an ancient crater, of several acres, with an abrupt rim, or wall, on every side, the whole interior as bare of verdure as the back of your hand, but having dense vegetation all around it. At this spot—as I will mention for the benefit of Josh and the other new recruits—the Ravagers have long had a secret halting-place, station, retreat, or whatever you choose to call it, but which is generally spoken of in our annals as the 'Crater Camp.' I have passed many a night here, when journeying to or from our headquarters at the Quadrangle, and we have here three or four small buildings, including a woodshed and a shelter for our horses!"

"How dare you?" queried Josh. "I should think the first hunter who comes this way would see these buildings, comprehend what they are for, and set a trap for you!"

"Impossible, for forty reasons," returned Finklestone. "The rim of the crater rises perpendicularly three hundred feet above the surrounding woods, and is everywhere so broken, scaly, and dangerous, that I do not believe any human being was ever desperate enough to undertake to climb it. At only one spot is there a rift in the rim, and this is reached by a high and narrow natural causeway, a mere isthmus of rock, and even this one entrance is so thoroughly masked by huge boulders and pines that you have to be close at hand before it becomes visible. In fact, this gateway is so narrow and difficult, especially in the night, that I shall have to conduct you into the crater by twos."

"And once we're in?" queried Josh.

"Oh, it's one of the snuggest retreats the eye of man ever looked upon," declared Finklestone, enthusiastically. "There is one spot at the entrance where half a dozen men could defy all the world, if all the world would come without cannon. The interior of the crater, however, is like the floor of a house—smooth and level—and here you are shut in by such high walls that even such a wind as this cannot enter. There is also a splendid spring of water, which is evidently forced up by hydraulic pressure from some reservoir in the adjacent hills, as it always rains at the same level, no lower and no higher, whatever the quantity of water taken from it!"

"What a remarkable place!" exclaimed Mrs. Goggin, as her brother dismounted. "And is it here that we are to pass the day, Dorus?"

"Yes, unless I give orders to the contrary, which I've no present intention of doing."

"But is it not possible that the pursuers will reach here in the course of the day?"

"No, Dollie. At least there is not one chance in a million that they will be able to follow us here, and the chances are still less that they will be able to stumble upon us by sheer accident."

He had given these views for all present, rather than for his sister alone, and he now added:

"Allow me to go first and see that the coast is clear. Remain where you are, all of you."

He went on at a slow pace, leading his horse, with occasional halts to look and listen, and soon disappeared from the view of his companions, although they could hear the tread of his horse over a hard and echoing surface, apparently a path of solid rock.

"It's all right," he soon called, in a voice which sounded hollow and strange, coming from the interior of the crater and echoing against its lofty sides. "There is plenty of dry wood here and I'll soon have a fire. Wait in patience."

The two scouts exchanged startled whispers at the mention of the word fire, and began to realize that their adventure had reached a critical point.

CHAPTER XXVI.

UNAWARE OF HIS PERIL.

At the end of a minute or two, the light of a fire began reaching its fiery gleams up into the dark clouds flying above the Crater Camp, and was welcomed by a general murmur of satisfaction from the observant Ravagers.

"You see?" called Finklestone, whose movements could almost be followed by his gigantic shadows, as he piled fuel on the flames. "It will be well lighted by the time you all get here, and you can see where you are, or at least what are your surroundings. Patience! I'm coming!"

"Shall I go over with you, Dollie?" asked Josh Reeder, who had made his way to her side. "I mean when the cap'n comes for you. Of course I wouldn't dare undertake to pilot you over in this darkness, as I am not acquainted with this region."

"Yes, Josh, I shall be glad of your company," was the reply of Mrs. Goggin, as she took the arm of her admirer and leaned heavily upon it. "See! my brother has lighted an immense torch to show us our way. How nice!"

She turned toward the spot the scouts had just occupied, as if to communicate her enjoyment to them, but she saw that they had vanished.

They had, in fact, withdrawn to the rear of the little party, so as to be out of the way of the

coming torch, as well as of the fire Budd had kindled.

Mrs. Goggin watched the zigzags made by her brother, with occasional eclipses, as he traversed the intervening space, and uttered an exclamation of joy when he again stood beside her.

"Give me your reins," he said, addressing Josh and his sister.

The request was complied with.

"Don't fret," he enjoined, with a glance at the others. "I'll get you all over as soon as I can."

With his torch in one hand, and the reins of his sister and Josh in the other, he proceeded to lead their horses to the vicinity of the fire he had kindled.

"What a dangerous passage!" Mrs. Goggin could not help exclaiming, with a sigh of relief. "I wouldn't return over that spot for anything till morning!"

"And what a lonely scene around us!" exclaimed Josh Reeder, as he assisted Mrs. Goggin to alight, sending a swift glance around upon the tall, encircling rim of rocks. "But what a safe hiding-place!"

"Now for the rest!" remarked Finklestone turning away. "You'll find a place for your horses under yonder shed."

Drawing the arm of Mrs. Goggin within his own, Josh took his way to the shed indicated, the light from the fire being already ample to reveal his surroundings.

"We can be comfortable here," he observed, with appreciative glances, as he led the horses under the shed. "Ransom has brought provisions enough for a couple of days, including coffee and utensils, and our stay here will be nothing more nor less than a sort of picnic."

He secured the horses to rings in the wall of the shed, above rude boxes serving the place of mangers, and then conducted Mrs. Goggin in the direction of the fire.

As she had foreseen, the fireplace was under cover, it occupying nearly the whole of one side of a low building some twenty feet square, and surmounted by a widely-spreading roof. The entrance of this structure was even wider than the fireplace and immediately in front of it, and was furnished with two doors which swung in opposite directions.

"I hope the snakes and centipedes have not taken possession," exclaimed Mrs. Goggin, as she surveyed the place. "Who could sleep in those empty bunks along the wall?"

"Well, you could, if you were as tired as I am," rejoined Reeder, smilingly. "With an overcoat or a horse-blanket for a covering, one can sleep there like a king. You wait till all of us are here, and the scene will be less gloomy."

Ringwood and Ted Grupp were the next two to be conducted past the dangerous entrance, and then came the two Ransoms, leaving the five guardsmen and the two scouts on the outer side of the passage.

"This thing is getting a little monotonous," remarked Finklestone, as he returned to the waiting group. "Let's see, there are seven more of you. I think you can go safely in two batches—four now, and three later. But the two men ahead had better lead the two horses behind, and all of you must stick close together and keep quiet."

No opposition was made to this proposition, and four of the guardsmen were duly guided through the entrance, leaving only three of the party behind them.

"The circle is rapidly narrowing to a point, Ben," whispered Buffalo Bill to his ally, as they allowed their impatient steeds to draw them out of earshot of the waiting guardsman. "Of course we can't go near that fire or allow Finklestone to look us over with that torch!"

"Of course not," returned Ben Letts. "We should be recognized before you could say 'Hail Columbia!' What's your idea, Bill?"

"First to capture this guardsman! We can easily do it!"

"Certainly. There's ample time!"

"And then we must capture Budd Finklestone, as already suggested. Hitch your horse and we'll suppress that traitorous guard!"

Their horses hitched to low-branched saplings which covered the proceeding, the two scouts returned to the unsuspecting guardsman, whose eyes were fixed impatiently in the direction of the lights now multiplying rapidly within the camp, as the different members provided themselves with torches and proceeded to explore their surroundings.

"We've a little surprise for you, comrade," said Buffalo Bill, "and must ask you not to say anything to any one about it. In a word, my friend and I are not what we seem, but are—just raise your hands over your head! Silence!"

The pressure of the muzzle of a revolver against the temple of the guardsman completed the revelation.

Of course the man could have uttered a single yell before being silenced forever, and the scouts took their chances of such a proceeding, but it must be said in honor of their mode of procedure, as a lawyer would say, that the number of men who would cry out under those circumstances is exceedingly limited. In all their long experience the scouts had never encountered even one.

"I—I have nothing to say," gasped the guardsman, as Ben Letts took his wrists in a grasp of steel and lowered them behind him, proceeding to tie them together with a dexterity which showed that this was not his first performance in that line. "I comprehend! You—you are Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts!"

"Right you are, the first time trying," acknowledged Ben Letts. "Allow us to add that it will be safer for you as well as for us if we gag you."

Nothing more was said until the guardsman, as helpless as a trussed fowl, had been conveyed to a secure hiding-place, with an injunction to be quiet, and the scouts had returned to the spot where they had been awaiting the return of Finklestone.

They were just in time.

"Here he comes, Bill," said Ben.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AGAIN IN CUSTODY.

As Budd Finklestone neared Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts, they advanced to meet him, approaching from opposite directions, and taking care not to let the light of his torch fall on their features.

"Where's the rest of you?" he demanded referring to the recreant guard the scouts had seized, gagged, and secreted.

"He's where you'll soon be," returned Buffalo Bill, in a tone of deadly menace, seizing the torch of the questioner with one hand, and taking the drop on him with the other.

"Dead?" gasped the astounded Ravager, raising his hands unbidden, after a long, horrible, staring pause.

"No, simply a prisoner," replied Buffalo Bill. "I see you comprehend what we want of you. But Ben is not tall enough to tie your hands at that height. Lower them a little!"

Finklestone did so, but in a stupefied and mechanical sort of way, as if he could not yet realize the dreadful eclipse his recent jubilation had suffered.

"I—I see," he faltered, in awful, paralyzing consternation. "You are Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts!"

"For once you speak the truth, Cap'n Whoop-pee," acknowledged Ben, giving prompt attention to the task of securing the prisoner. "We've hooked onto you again, and no mistake! Take it easy!"

It was hard to do so.

Such a despairing, horrified look as had now invaded Budd's livid countenance, no human being had ever before seen upon it.

Nothing less than the dread certainty which stared him in the face—that of instant death—could have kept him quiet and silent.

"You were not so stupid, then, after all, as I supposed?" he demanded, with a wild, wistful look toward the scene he had just quitted.

"You spotted our proposed departure?"

"Naturally," acknowledged Buffalo Bill.

"And the secret tunnel?"

"We discovered it!"

"And the sort of guards we had?"

"We took note of them!"

"And you watched our flight?"

"To be candid, we were not far distant!"

The prisoner uttered a dismal sigh.

"And we thought we were so cunning!" he ejaculated.

"Most rogues think the same, and that's why they're so generally a failure," commented Ben, with smiling contempt, as also with very evident satisfaction. "There! your hands are fast! Have you any further use for your tongue just at present? Do you wish to leave with us any message for your sister or your friends?"

The fears of the prisoner returned again, under the prickings of his inner consciousness, and he became as white as a sheet. He knew that his captors were aware of his recent attempts to confess their degradation, and it was only natural to jump to the conclusion that they intended to dispatch him on the instant, treating him as he would so gladly and quickly have treated them. He trembled like a leaf.

"You—you mean to kill me?" he faltered.

"Not unless you tempt us by talking too loud, or by some other rashness," answered Ben Letts. "But we propose to give you the best of reasons for holding your tongue during the next few hours."

"I see! What a pity!"

He sighed deeply again, as his glances turned anew in the direction of his noisy and unsuspecting followers.

"We can send your sister a line of explanation, if you say so," offered Ben Letts, comprehending his pain and annoyance. "All you need say is, 'Gone away with Sam and Hank. Remain here till I return. B.' See?"

The prisoner reflected rapidly, with renewed wistful glances into the camp.

"That would be more your message than mine, I think," he then said.

"Well, let it be ours, then," said Buffalo Bill, with smiling grimness. "It will at least have the merit of truth!"

"Then you have captured Hank and Sam?"

"We have, and also Private Hillyer," acknowledged Ben Letts. "You are the fourth

of the original fugitives who have fallen into our hands."

"Where—where are they?" asked Finklestone, peering around into the darkness.

"You'll excuse us. Time is pressing," returned Ben. "We must be off."

He produced a gag as he spoke, and motioned the prisoner to open his mouth. It was a hard task to comply, but there was no help for it, and at the end of another minute all danger of any disturbance from Finklestone was definitely averted.

"Of course we'll leave the line you have suggested, Ben," said Buffalo Bill, as he produced a notebook and pencil, and tearing a leaf from the former. "It may tranquilize the sister, and possibly keep the whole crowd here until we are ready to bag them!"

The note written, it was stuck in a forked stick Ben had fixed in the ground, and the torch was placed upright near it to point it out in due season to Mrs. Goggin.

"It's awkward that we have one less horse than we want," remarked Buffalo Bill, as his gaze again turned toward the camp. "I shall have to go and get one."

"But the risk, Bill!"

"We must take it! But first we'll mount our prisoners and tie their feet together under their saddles, so that you can get away, Ben, whatever may happen!"

This was soon done, and Buffalo Bill turned toward the camp, after hitching the three horses.

"It's a risky business attempting to get there without a torch," suggested Ben.

"True, but we can't wait for daylight," was the rejoinder. "The prolonged absence of Finklestone may be remarked at any moment, and some of that crowd will begin to wonder why the rest of us do not appear. Fortunately that fire is now sending some light this way, and everybody seems busy with an examination of the camp. I'll venture!"

He hurried away as he ceased speaking, and Ben Letts boldly followed him, ascending the precipitous and dangerous ridge until he could see into the camp, and then he struck an attitude of attention which did not change until he caught a glimpse of the moving figure of his ally within the hidden rendezvous.

"That's good for a beginning," he then muttered, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and sighing like a pair of bellows. "But now comes the critical point!"

He continued to look, with his hand on his rifle, ready to dispatch a bullet into any one who should attempt to interfere with the intruder, and for a couple of minutes he was about as uneasy and uncomfortable as he had ever been. At the end of that time, however, he saw Buffalo Bill on his way back, leading a horse, and already in the act of disappearing under the hanging rocks which shaded the inner end of the dangerous passage.

With what breathless interest he crept back and waited another minute will be comprehended, and then all his anxiety was ended by the return of the successful forager.

"I think the horse I have secured is the one ridden by Finklestone," announced the newcomer, striking a match. "Yes, it is. It was where he hastily left it, and was much more handy than if he had taken it to the shed. Each of us now has a horse, and we'll vanish."

He mounted and started, leading Finklestone's horse, and Ben Letts followed, leading the horse upon which had been secured Private Hillyer.

For at least half an hour the retreat was continued at a walk, and not a word was spoken, Ben Letts having nothing further to do than to conform his movements to those of Buffalo Bill.

"We are now a couple of miles from that camp," then said the latter.

"At least that, Bill, and consequently out of hearing."

"I think we may accordingly remove those gags from the mouths of the prisoners."

"Certainly," confirmed Ben, as both dismounted.

The suggestion was duly carried out.

"Many thanks," said Finklestone, with a long sigh of relief. "How much better that is, isn't it, Hillyer?"

"I should say as much," answered his fellow-prisoner. "I was almost suffocated."

"Of course you both understand that this liberty is not to be abused," remarked Buffalo Bill. "At the least attempt to call for help, or to otherwise endanger us, you will be shot without a word of warning!"

"We comprehend all that of course," said Finklestone. "We shall be quiet and silent!"

"Then we'll take charge of your revolvers and resume our journey."

The scouts suited their actions to the word and then regained their saddles.

"But what bothers me," declared Finklestone, after a brief pause, "is the fact that I see nothing of Sam Gaddley and Hank Tilkins. Where are they?"

"At the fort," replied Buffalo Bill.

"You don't mean it?" stammered the astonished prisoner.

"I do," assured the scout quietly.
 "But you said you captured them."
 "So we did."

"Where, may I ask?"
 "At the northeast angle of the fort, as they descended from the wall. They came alone, you'll remember, and were the first to take that route. We 'trussed' them promptly, and Corporal Dimmick, who was with us, with ample assistance, had them taken in irons to their new quarters."

"And—and you two took their places on this long ride?" gasped Finklestone.
 "Exactly."

The consternation of the prisoner, as he recalled his conversations with his sister, and the games of "fox-and-geese" he had played to throw off pursuit, was of such a nature that he could not speak for several minutes.

"How completely I'm dished!" he then ejaculated.

"Well, I should smile if you wasn't!" returned Ben Letts grimly. "And not only have we hooked on to you, Mr. Whoop-pee, but we're going back to that lovely Crater Camp to scoop the rest of your tribe as soon as we've landed you in the fort beside Sam Gaddley and Hank Tilkins!"

Such indeed was the intention of the scouts. The grand question was, would they be able to carry it out?

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MYSTERIOUS UNKNOWN.

BUFFALO BILL was just in the act of asking himself what dangers and complications could possibly manifest themselves, when his horse recoiled abruptly, tossing its head high and rearing with a wild snort of terror.

This performance was repeated, in substance, by the horse of Ben Letts.

Slipping to the ground, the scouts peered in the direction they had been going and were able to make out that they were on the verge of a tremendous precipice.

There was a deeper tint to the darkness ahead of them—a falling away or sinking of the tree-tops—a sudden vanishing of footing—which could be accounted for upon no other theory than that a vast abyss yawned immediately before them.

And from these grim shadowy depths, as the two men halted in listening wonder, there came up twirling puffs of wind in such a way as to show that their range had been unimpeded by tree or rock for a long distance.

"We've evidently missed our way some distance back," said Buffalo Bill. "Listen!"

He felt around at his feet for a stone, which he tossed into the yawning void he divined rather than saw.

It seemed an age before the crash of the stone came up to him from the tree-tops and rocks below.

"It's even so, Ben," he resumed. "We've gone astray, and our path is cut off! Here is a regular barranca! Hark!"

A tread of heavy and bounding animals succeeded, pawing and scratching up some gap in the cliff, and the next instant three immense animals leaped silently into the midst of the group!

"What are they, Bill?—bears or catamounts?" asked Ben Letts, getting his rifle into readiness for use.

Buffalo Bill could not decide, but just then his nostrils detected a strange scent, as if the mysterious animals had brought it with them.

And just then, too, as the uneasy horses made a sudden flank movement, snorting anew and endeavoring to break away, there came in a stern voice from a cluster of bushes scarcely a rod away the one word:

"Halt!"

The scouts checked the attempted flight of their horses, continuing to look and listen, and reflecting that the man in their path must be some solitary hermit, squatter, or moonshiner, rather than a representative of the Ravagers or of any other band of outlaws. In other terms, there was no necessity of regarding him as dangerous until some further development.

"We're pretty well 'halted' already, I should say, stranger," returned Buffalo Bill, quietly, after a barely perceptible pause. "Have you a lantern handy?"

"Naw, don't need no lantern!"

"Then you have the advantage of me," pursued the scout, "for I need one, and if you have no objections I'll produce it."

He drew from one of the pockets of his overcoat a dark-lantern—of the bull's-eye variety—with matches for lighting it, and within a few moments, sheltering himself from the wind behind his horse, which his proceedings promptly tranquilized, he was able to throw a vivid glare of light upon his surroundings.

Naturally his first thought was of the abyss yawning ahead of him, and a single glance was enough to tell him that the impression he had conceived of its character and extent was perfectly correct.

Then he hastened to assure himself of the nature of the panting animals beside him, sending a broad stream of light upon them.

"Siberian bloodhounds, eh?" he recognized, as the creatures slunk away from the glare of his bull's-eye, almost falling over one another in their haste.

"Yis, purps!" came from the unknown, who still remained concealed in the bushes from which he had ordered a halt, the light of the bull's-eye being unable to penetrate to him.

"Good for anything?" queried Buffalo Bill.
 "Wal, you'd think so, I reckon, ef I war to tell 'em to chew ye!"

"It's funny they didn't bark," remarked Ben Letts, who had lighted a lantern and devoted it to the same use as his ally.

"They're not a barking sort," explained the unknown from his covert. "But they tear and bite all the same when I tells 'em to do it!"

The scouts could not help looking at the dogs in admiring astonishment, as they came sniffing back, their eyes having apparently become accustomed to the glare of the light.

They were of the height of a calf of six weeks, and displayed all the characteristics of their race—deep, wide jaws, heavy, flabby lips, and lank, angular frame and limbs, at the same time that they were strangely powerful and active. They were as much alike as peas in the same pod, and were the color of light sole-leather.

"They're fine-looking dogs," remarked Buffalo Bill. "Don't you think so, Ben?"

"I do, Bill. All one litter, too," returned Ben Letts, with an appreciative air. "What are they good for, stranger?"

"Hunters!" was the laconic answer.

"Indeed?" queried Ben. "What do they hunt?"

"Wal, I've never l'arned 'em to hunt more'n one sort o' game!" announced the evident owner.

"And that one?" asked Ben Letts.

"Goes on two legs and drinks whisky and chaws tobacco!" was the fierce response, with a grim, fearless sort of merriment.

"Then they're man-hunters?" commented Buffalo Bill. "Speakin' of whisky, however," and he turned his face anew toward the dogs, "they seem to reek of it!"

"Yis, it do seem to linger in their ha'r a little," acknowledged the owner, with a careless chuckle. "I've been washing 'em in that sort o' p'izen, ye see, to keep off the mange and worry the fleas! And now let me ax you a few questions. How many in your party?"

"Only what you see—four!"

"Two on the ground, and two on the horses!" exclaimed the unknown—who also remained the unseen—with the tone of a man taking an inventory. "The two on the ground armed with rifles and revolvers, and the two others strapped to their horses and their hands tied behind 'em! Evidently two sheriffs or deputy-sheriffs with two prisoners!"

"That's about the state of it, stranger," acknowledged Buffalo Bill.

"Whar ye bound to?"

"To Fort Harris!"

"Whar ye from?"

"From a certain deserted camp between two and three miles west of us."

"Whar those empty buildings are, ye mean, in the crater?"

"Exactly."

"It's thar ye caught 'em?"

"Just so!"

"What have they been doing?"

"Oh, a great deal more than I have time to tell you," explained the scout, with the same candid patience he had constantly exhibited during the interview. "Did you hear of the raids of the hostiles and masked robbers through this county last spring and last year?"

"Naw! Wasn't here!"

"No? May I ask where you were?"

"In old Kintuck! I've been here only three or four months, more or less."

The scout smiled.

That "here," under the circumstances, was equivalent to an admission that the unknown was not a wandering hunter, but that he habitually remained in the vicinity where he had been encountered.

In other terms, he was familiar with his surroundings, and could guide the scouts out of their awkward predicament.

"And you've never heard of those raids to which I've alluded?" resumed Buffalo Bill.

"Nary a word!"

"Then you don't know anything about the Ravagers?"

"Naw, never heard of 'em, never saw 'em!"

"You don't very often see strangers hereabouts, I take it?"

"Naw—rarely! You're the second one I've exchanged a word with in two months."

"Well, there is one thing you can do for us, stranger," announced Buffalo Bill, "and that is to guide us out of this somewhat disagreeable situation. We wish to go on to Fort Harris, as I said, and we'll pay you well to get us started right."

"When did you come from the fort?"

"Since midnight."

"By what route?"

Buffalo Bill briefly described it.

"I see," returned the unknown. "I knows

ye're telling the truth. Them cawgs heerd ye going and coming, and that's how and why ye find us stirring, as we allows nothing to sarnavigate hereabouts 'bout knowing what it is. To come back to what we war talking about. You are only a mile and a half out of your way, or from the course ye took in coming, ef I understand rightly what ye've said."

"And you can give us the lift we need?" demanded the scout.

"Yis. But what will ye give me in return for my services?"

"Anything reasonable."

"Half a dollar?"

"Yes, a dollar."

"You're very liberal."

A brief silence succeeded, as if the unknown were listening or reflecting.

"Will you guide us out?" soon questioned Buffalo Bill.

"Yes, of course. That'll be a dollar easily 'arned. Wait a minnit."

A sound of stealthy footsteps succeeded, blending with a slight rustling of bushes, and the scouts redoubled their attention, supposing that the unknown was about to present himself to their notice.

Instead, the sounds in question died out abruptly and the silence around the scouts became deeper than ever.

"Are you there?" called Buffalo Bill, remarking that the three bloodhounds had vanished as they had come.

No answer was given him.

"Arn't you coming to guide us, stranger?" pursued the scout, with sudden misgivings.

The silence remained unbroken by any word or sound from the unknown.

"Evidently enough, he has given us the slip!" exclaimed Ben Letts, with an air of keen chagrin. "He has vanished!"

"Perhaps not. I'll call again."

He acted upon this thought repeatedly, but no response reached him.

"Sure enough," he finally concluded. "The rascal has left us in the lurch."

"The infernal mutton-head!" exclaimed Budd Finklestone, with a savage voice and mien, for the first time breaking the silence since the encounter with the unknown. "The stupid idiot!"

"What's the matter now?" asked Ben Letts, turning his attention anew upon the prisoner, after having been several minutes oblivious of his presence.

"Matter?" repeated Finklestone fiercely. "Do you suppose I would have remained quiet and silent all this time, if I had even suspected that the fellow would take himself off in this fashion?"

"Why, what would you have done?"

"Done? I would have bribed him to help us out of this, Hillyer and myself! The poor fool! He might have had a thousand dollars for giving us our freedom!"

"Pity you didn't speak sooner, cap'n," said Private Hillyer. "I was, of course, waiting for you to take the lead in the matter. I'm sorry now that I didn't speak up as soon as the stranger spoke to us. We should have been the first to talk to him, and told him a good story. We might have been free at this moment."

"Yes, we might," returned Budd Finklestone, with a bitter curse. "If we had bribed him, and waked him up to do it, he could have shot both of these infernal scouts from his concealment," he added, carried away by his regret and vexation, "before they could have even set eyes upon him!"

The scouts exchanged significant glances.

"It seems to me, Bill, that I've heard about enough of that sort of talk," then said Ben Letts indignantly.

"Yes, and seen enough of that sort of spirit," returned Buffalo Bill. "We'll take good care that they don't have any chance to show us the kind of favor suggested. Give me that bull's-eye a moment, while I cover them. At the least squawk from either, their last ride will be ended!"

The prisoners whined and protested, but they did not dare raise their voices, and all they did say was as little heeded as the murmur of the wind. In another minute their gags had been replaced securely.

"And now to lead our own way out of this box," proposed Buffalo Bill. "Fortunately we're not exactly helpless with these lights—"

"Hist!" suddenly interrupted Ben Letts, facing about quickly. "Somebody—or something—is coming!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN IDYL OF THE NIGHT.

THE eyes of Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts, like those of their prisoners, turned quickly toward the sort of gap by which the three bloodhounds had made their appearance and taken their departure.

Far down in this gap had arisen a strange scratching and rattling, as of basty climbing—almost such a sound, in fact, as had been caused by the bloodhounds in going and coming—and this sound grew louder and came nearer every moment, until a human figure suddenly came bounding into the view of the watchers.

The lanterns of the scouts had of course been focused upon the crest of the cliff at that point where it was intersected by the gap, and they were quick to note what they now had under their gaze.

The figure was that of a sinewy, well-knit girl of eighteen years, with long, flowing hair of a very light flaxen color, and with large blue eyes which were at once gentle and fearless. Her form was full and well-rounded, and the plain and somewhat outgrown calico dress in which it was incased served to render its rare grace and loveliness all the more apparent.

For a moment the new-comer seemed dazed by the light falling upon her, or by the two handsome faces revealed by it, and then she advanced toward the scouts with a candid, trustful mien, exclaiming:

"Father has sent me to guide you. He said you'd give me a dollar, and that the mention of the fact would be a sufficient voucher for me."

The scouts exchanged glances indicative of the keenest interest, and then brought such a pleased and surprised gaze to bear upon the girl that she could not help blushing scarlet.

"Your father?" exclaimed Buffalo Bill. "We expected him to guide us."

"He has other business, sir."

"At this hour of the night?" and the scouts could not help looking their astonishment, as their gaze lingered admiringly upon the girlish face and form before them.

"And I know the way as well as he does," added the girl, quietly and firmly. "You have only to follow me."

She produced a stick which had been finely splintered at one end and soaked in turpentine and resin, and touched a lighted match to it, when it flamed up into a torch of the most effective description.

"This way," she indicated, turning in the direction from which the scouts had come. "You cannot go down where I came up. I must take you back half a mile before we can get clear of this ravine."

"Do we need to dismount, miss?" demanded Ben Letts, as he hastened to place himself next to the fair guide.

"No, sir," she responded, "unless you think yourself more sure-footed than your horse. The path is easy and open."

"Then why shouldn't you go up behind me?" suggested Ben Letts, turning red suddenly at his own boldness.

A swift glance was raised to his face.

"Thank you, stranger. I will!"

She stood up on her toes beside him, and he drew her up with a stout effort, planting her behind him.

"Of course we'll take the lead, sir," she said to Buffalo Bill, with a graceful nod and smile, as she threw away her torch and took the bull's-eye from the hand of Ben Letts, sending its glare into the darkness ahead. "You've only to follow us."

She shuddered involuntarily at what she was compelled to see of the prisoners while thus glancing back and speaking, and a look of pain flitted across her features.

Buffalo Bill noticed her emotion.

"You can let me lead that horse, Ben," he said, considerably. "I can just as well lead two as one."

The transfer was duly made, and the little cavalcade started briskly.

"Now for your orders, sir," said the fair guide to Ben, as she faced a little more to the front, and passed her arm around his waist to steady herself without asking permission. "You must be very particular to go where I send the light."

"I comprehend, miss," returned Ben Letts, with a glad, hallucinated sort of air. "How easy! how nice! You are comfortable?"

"Perfectly, thank you. Pull a little to the left, please," she added. "And don't stare at me so over your shoulder! Look where you're going!"

"I—I can't help looking at you," stammered Ben, in a voice which vibrated with new and strangely sweet emotions. "You seem such a nice girl," he went on, his glances coming back to her as soon as he had looked ahead. "It seems so very singular to find such a rare flower growing alone in such a wilderness—"

"Alone, sir?" and the candid eyes looked him through again, and even lingered upon him briefly, as if through some undefined and novel magnetism. "Alone, with my father and brother, with my books and flowers, and with my birds and music! Alone, with these grand and glorious woods and mountains around us, where still linger the footprints of the Infinite Father, as left on the first primeval morning? No, no, stranger! There is no such thing as loneliness for those who have once entered the great temple of nature!"

"You are a strange girl, I see," said Ben Letts, with admiring fervor. "But I like you! You must have a pretty name! May I know what it is?"

"Quick! more to the right!" cried the fair guide, imperatively. "Do you want me to take the reins from you? If not, you must 'end to business!"

"Excuse me, miss. I'm so sorry," said Ben. "I really will do better if you'll answer my question."

"My name is Esther," said the girl, with a demure glance at her cavalier, as if she were just a little anxious to know how he would like it.

"Esther?" he repeated. "I'm glad to hear it. Esther is one of the nicest of names. It was my mother's. If I ever marry, Esther shall be the name of my wife. You came lately from Kentucky, it seems?"

The maiden looked at him quickly, almost with a start.

"Did father tell you that?" she asked.

"He did, or I shouldn't have known it."

"You must have made a good impression upon him," she declared. "He hasn't said as much as that to any one else since we crossed the Mississippi!"

"I'm glad to hear it," said Ben, taking care to follow all the movements of the light she continued to send ahead of them. "How unlike you he is!"

"In a few externals, like his speech—yes. I took something from my mother—who, for three years past," she added, with a reverent, tender glance into the wild sky, "has been a dweller in the holy of holies. You cannot say what my father is like, stranger, until you know him. He is one of the noblest and best of men!"

"Your assurance is all I need in proof of that, Esther," said Ben. "May I ask for your other name?"

"It's unnecessary to give it," she answered, gently. "You can call me Esther as easily as you could call me anything else. I—I am afraid my father would not approve of my mentioning his name to strangers. In a few minutes more," she continued, with a sigh, "you will be safe upon the trail by which you came, and I shall leave you. You will go your ways and I shall go mine, and there is little likelihood that we shall ever see each other again. Under these circumstances," and another sigh escaped her, "what does a name more or less signify?"

CHAPTER XXX.

A STRANGE POINT OF CONTACT.

THE girl raised a timid and yet searching glance to Ben's face, which had become singularly serious, and even expressive of pain and regret.

"I shall hope to see you again, Esther," he said, suddenly becoming conscious of the presence of the prisoners, and experiencing a sense of thankfulness that he could talk without being overheard by them. "Pardon me if I frankly say a word more. I have carried around with me for years an ideal of such a girl as you are without having hitherto found its realization, and that is why it seems as if you were almost an old acquaintance."

Esther heaved a sigh, and a light that was almost tender flashed into her starry eyes.

"I feel that way, too," she admitted, with a candor as charming as rare. "I must have seen you in dreams, or perhaps in that ideal world to which you have alluded, and in which I, too, live so much. But—"

She paused, sighing profoundly.

"There's little use of this sort of talk," she added, rousing herself and raising her head with an arch smile. "If our route had been a little rougher and less open, we would have been using our time to better advantage. You live at Fort Harris, I suppose?"

"I have been there for two years past, Esther," he answered, pleased to think that the question indicated an interest in him.

"Are you a soldier?"

"I have been, but am now free, my time having expired."

"Is your mother living?"

"No, Esther. She died four years ago, and I am now all alone in the world, having neither brother nor sister."

The maiden heaved another great sigh, and her glances turned again to his face with a sympathy that thrilled him.

"Your mother must have been a splendid woman," she said.

"Thank you! She was, Esther. She was sweet, noble, soulful—like you, in short! To see me, as I've run to seed in the great, brutal battle of life, you'd never guess how gentle and charming she was!"

"Oh, yes, I should!" and the sweet eyes looked up shyly at him. "I comprehend what she was by what I've seen of you! May I ask for your name?"

"Of course!" and Ben started self-reproachfully. "How stupid of me not to have mentioned it at once when you gave me yours! It's simply Ben Letts."

"Really? How odd! My brother's name is Ben. How surprised he'll be."

"Surprised? What about?"

"Why, when I tell him that one of the men I guided is named Ben. I'm glad that is your name," she added, with another shy glance. "I—I like it!"

Having presented himself, Ben hastened, as in

duty bound, to present his companion, which he did in those glowing and appreciative terms which the occasion brought so naturally to his lips.

He was delighted to see how much the fact of his being in such company commended him to Esther.

"I've often heard of him," she said, after exchanging a few pleasant remarks with Buffalo Bill, while the horses continued to advance at an easy pace, "and, now I recall the fact, I've also heard of you, I think. Yes, yes! I've heard Brother Ben speak of you!"

"You have?" cried Ben Letts, with a flush of joy. "Under what circumstances?"

"Why, didn't you rescue a wounded comrade from a band of hostiles?"

"Sure enough," admitted Ben, suppressing the narrative with a gesture.

"Then you are the very man brother Ben was speaking so warmly about," declared Esther, with a glow of proud satisfaction. "How pleased my father and brother will be to hear that I have been able to render some service, however small, to two such men as Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts!"

"Many thanks for the compliment, Esther. I shall hope to make the acquaintance of your father and brother when I come this way again."

"But—will you come this way again?" faltered Esther.

"I certainly shall if you will let me."

"Why, how could I prevent it?" and she smiled brightly at him.

"Then you do not forbid it? A thousand thanks, Esther! But, where do you live, and how shall I find you?"

"You need only come anywhere hereabouts," answered Esther, "and these dogs will find you—as they've found others! Should you be in a hurry to arrive"—how archly she looked at him—"you can fire your rifle, and some one will look you up! That's as much as I need to say," she added, a serious look banishing her smile, "until I see if you'll really care enough about me to come!"

"Oh, I'll be here, Esther," assured Ben, earnestly, "and within very few days. In the mean time, you will be my one constant thought!"

"Thank you, Ben Letts," returned Esther, with a flush that delighted him. "You will be welcome! But here we are," flashing her bull's-eye over a trail which had recently been left by many horses. "You passed here on your way westward, and will have no difficulty, with the aid of four lanterns, in going back to your starting-place."

She slipped from the horse, as Ben drew rein, and handed him back his bull's eye.

"Good-night, Mr. Letts," she added, offering her hand, as he also dismounted.

"Good-night, Esther, since we must leave you," he responded, shaking her hand warmly and pressing a kiss upon it ere releasing it. "Here is the promised dollar, and also the lantern to light your way back."

"Oh, I have another torch, thank you—"

"Then you must light it before you leave us," said Ben, earnestly.

She proceeded to do so.

"And I do not need to be paid," she continued, finishing the remark Ben had interrupted. "I am glad to serve friends without pay, and such I feel that you both are!"

"We are, indeed, Esther," said Buffalo Bill, dismounting and producing a bright half-eagle, "and on that account, I beg you to accept from us this trifle, not as pay for your services, but as a memento of a ride which will always be memorable to us both, and especially to my esteemed comrade. Nay, do not refuse it because it is gold," he added, as the girl drew back and raised her hands in a negative gesture, "for that fact renders it all the more like its fair recipient!"

For an instant the girl hesitated, her eyes gleaming like stars, despite a sudden mist which had dimmed them.

"Well, I will, many thanks," she then said, taking the piece daintily between her thumb and forefinger and passing it to her bosom by way of her lips. "Good-night, gentlemen! I wish you a safe and pleasant journey. May we meet again!"

She turned away, as the scouts responded to her farewells, and her torch flamed up briskly, causing the horse ridden by Finklestone to start.

As she looked up quickly, with that deprecating glance so natural to the circumstances, her gaze encountered his face, and she started as if shot, her face blanching and a wild scream of terror and amazement escaping her.

"The general!" she cried, recoiling, with a look of agonized recognition.

Finklestone bowed assent, an awful groan escaping him.

"A prisoner to these men?" and she waved her torch inquiringly over the prisoners, for the first time taking in fully their situation.

Another terrible groan resounded, accompanied by violent nods, as several agile forms came bounding along the trail, their outlines quickly developing into those of the three

bloodhounds the scouts had previously encountered.

"How strange! how terrible!" came from the whitened lips of the girl, who had tottered forward, waving her torch within a yard of Finklestone's face, as if to dissipate all possible doubts of his identity. "Oh, pitying heaven!"

And she bounded away like an antelope, vanishing promptly from the view of the motionless watchers, with her dogs scouring onward like a whirlwind around her!

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN IMPORTANT CLEW.

How discordantly the recognition of Finklestone by Esther crashed in upon the tender interest Ben Letts had begun to take in her, need not be stated.

He was shocked and pained beyond expression.

What could be the relations between them?

Where and how had their acquaintance commenced, and under what circumstances and conditions had it been continued?

How naturally a flood of questions of this nature came surging into Ben's soul.

For a few moments he stood leaning against his horse, pale, breathless, and bewildered, staring wonderingly after the beautiful girl, and listening to the noise made by her bloodhounds in crashing through the bushes in their constant deviations from the trail.

"So! it seems she knows this horrible miscreant!" he then exclaimed, a hot flush sweeping over his face.

"She at least called him general," returned Buffalo Bill, with hardly less surprise than Ben's, if with more calmness, "and spoke to him as one speaks to an old acquaintance."

"That's only too certain!"

"It's clear, too," continued Buffalo Bill, "that she was horrified to see him in such a situation."

"Or else at seeing him in our hands," returned Ben grimly, endeavoring to master his emotions. "Didn't she speak as his friend?"

Buffalo Bill smiled somewhat cynically.

"I've never seen a young girl show so much feeling as that at the misfortunes of an enemy," he declared. "I will not undertake to say, however, just what sentiments are indicated by her recognition of Finklestone, her emotion, or her sudden departure."

"What a pity that we didn't detain her, or even pursue her!" cried Ben, still looking and listening, as if tempted to mount his horse and take the action he had suggested.

"With those dogs in her immediate neighborhood?" queried Buffalo Bill. "For one, I beg to be excused!"

"Say yes or no, Bill!" cried Ben, suddenly facing his ally. "Is Esther the friend of this man or not?"

"No, Ben!"

"Then what is the secret of her acquaintance with him?"

"It may be as simple as kissing. For instance, this reptile has often passed near here on his way to or from the 'Quadrangle,' or even on his way to or from the Crater. Those dogs have hunted him up. She even said, when suggesting that they would find you, that they had found others. This man has doubtless imposed upon Esther and her relatives, telling them he is a general in the army, and looking for deserters, red-skins, or what not, and they have no conception of his real character."

Ben drew a long breath of relief, his face brightening.

"Oh, what a load you have taken from my soul!" he cried, in a tone of indescribable gratitude. "How I thank you for clearing up this awful puzzle!"

"But I've cleared up nothing, Ben. I've merely suggested—"

"Oh, but you've stated the facts just as they are, Bill!" interrupted Ben earnestly. "That girl is as much taken in by this man's chatter as was Colonel Naylor up to the moment of your arrival! Don't you see it?"

"The theory is certainly reasonable—"

"What you've said is the absolute truth in the case," said Ben eagerly. "I do not need a word more to see just how the case stands. Poor girl! we must undeceive her! It's another case of the wolf and the lamb! How sorry I am that I should wrong her in my thoughts for even a moment!"

"Perhaps Finklestone himself will give us some information on the nature of his relations to the girl," suggested Buffalo Bill.

"I'd scorn to ask him," said Ben. "Besides, I couldn't put the least faith in anything he might say."

An incoherent murmur came from Budd Finklestone—the loudest sound, in fact, his gag would permit him to utter.

"What are you choking, Whoop-pee?" cried Ben Letts, hastening toward him.

The prisoner shook his head energetically.

"Are you ill?"

Another vigorous negative.

"Oh, I comprehend! You are mad because we're wasting time here! You wish to be moving!"

The prisoners both assented, jerking their

heads up and down several times with wrathful vigor, while their frames shook as if with convulsions.

"Well, you needn't be too eager," commented Buffalo Bill. "We shall move on when we get ready. Men of your sort, like beggars, mustn't be choosers. You ought to remember that you're paying the natural penalty of your misdeeds, and that patience under reverses is the highest form of courage."

He handed to Ben the reins of the horseridden by Private Hillyer, and swung himself lightly into his own saddle. Ben Letts was not slow in following this example, and the couple resumed progress, to the evident relief of the prisoners, who relapsed into silence.

"What a girl she is!" remarked Ben, in a low tone, a few moments later, thus showing what he was thinking about.

"I agree with you," returned Buffalo Bill, with hearty sympathy. "I am not surprised that you are smitten, and I was glad to note that she reciprocated. You will, of course, see her again, and I shall expect in due course an invitation to the wedding."

"Oh, if it were possible to win her!" sighed Ben. "But what can be the mystery of her residence in such an out of the way wilderness as this? And what sort of men can her father and brother be?"

"These are questions you can settle when you pay your proposed visit," suggested Buffalo Bill, with a smile.

"In any case," said Ben, "they're evidently wide-awake to the possibility of a disagreeable visit of some sort, and do not intend to be caught napping!"

The prisoners groaned again, and the scouts turned their glances inquiringly upon them.

"You want to go faster?" queried Ben.

The prisoners bowed vigorously.

"Well, you shall," returned Ben, in a tone which expressed annoyance. "You've only to hold on, and you'll arrive on time, certain!"

What a ride was that which succeeded!

Now at a rattling gallop, and then at an easy jog or a walk, according to the nature of the ground they were traversing, they left mile after mile behind them, continuing to light their way with their lanterns.

Two or three times they had to dismount, to be sure that they were still upon the outward trail, and occasionally they consulted and compared compasses, so intense was the darkness, and so easy was it to get nervous in these strange solitudes.

At times, however, they shortened their way, in the usual style of travelers, by an exchange of views respecting the situation, or certain of its features.

For instance, they spoke of the guardsmen who had left the fort with the Ravagers; of the secret tunnel which had enabled them to escape; and of their own marked success in dealing with them.

Later, their thoughts went back to Mrs. Goggin and the Crater camp.

"Of course we'll send a detachment after them," said Buffalo Bill, expressing a decision he had reached within a minute of Finklestone's capture. "But they may find the camp deserted. Mrs. Goggin may have an understanding with her brother that she will repudiate at a glance that scrap of explanation we left behind us."

"She doubtless will take that course," returned Ben Letts. "It would be a strange thing for her brother to leave in that manner, when he could just as well have spent a minute in explaining his proposed absence. It was the best we could do, however, and it will certainly delay their flight or pursuit long enough for Josh and the rest of the Ravagers to discuss it."

Descending into the valley of the Cherry Creek, the scouts crossed the stream at the first ford they could find, and then laid their course direct for Fort Harris, the country being now sufficiently open to render this course practicable.

"We're getting on, you see!" then exclaimed Ben Letts, in a tone which betrayed how much the fact cheered him. "Evidently this man is bound to reach the fort, despite Mrs. Goggin or any one else!"

"Evidently," returned Buffalo Bill, with keen satisfaction. "And this important capture is not the only result of our masquerade. I begin to think we have a clew to the very headquarters of the Ravagers!"

"I was just thinking of that same thing, Bill!" cried Ben Letts. "You refer to the 'Quadrangle,' of which Finklestone has repeatedly spoken?"

"Exactly!"

The scouts turned their bull's eyes upon their principal prisoner, and noticed that his face had flushed to an intensely livid hue, while his eyes seemed ready to burst from their sockets.

"It struck me at once," resumed Ben Letts, "that the 'Quadrangle' can be located only at the spot where the State of Colorado is joined to the Territories of New Mexico, Arizona and Utah, in a right angle. This is, in fact, the only instance of a quadrangle in all the boundary lines of the United States!"

The scouts again looked at their prisoner.

He was now ghastly white, the blood having receded from his face, as if by the influence of some awful consternation.

"You see, Ben?" queried Buffalo Bill, with a jubilant laugh. "A single glance at that face is enough to confirm our theory. We shall find the headquarters of the Ravagers at or near the junction of the State with the Territories named. Is there any settlement thereabouts, Ben?"

"Yes, Bill," and it was now Ben's turn to flush and look excited. "Curiously enough, there is quite a hamlet at the junction aforesaid—a place of some eighteen or twenty houses, some of which are rocky and handsome. It is partly on the Navajo Reservation."

"Have you been there in person?"

"Yes, on one of the scouts we devoted to the Ravagers," explained Ben, with suppressed excitement. "We chased quite a body of them into that vicinity, when they vanished as suddenly as if changed into vapor. I see now what took place, Bill. The rascals made their way to this hamlet and assumed the rôle of squatters and ranchers. I recall now how nicely they played their game. We couldn't get a particle of information from them. They had never seen anything of the Ravagers in their neighborhood, and were as innocent as ignorant."

Buffalo Bill had listened as if entranced.

"That hamlet is doubtless the 'Quadrangle,' Ben," he declared, with an air of the fullest conviction. "As soon as we have landed these chaps beside Hank Tilkins and Sam Gaddley, we'll take a ride in that direction."

Once more the scouts turned their light upon Finklestone, and the air of indifference he endeavored to assume did not for a moment deceive them. They readily detected that he was a prey to the wildest regret and consternation.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE HOMEWARD JOURNEY.

A DULL, dismal lifting of the intense darkness had for some time been making itself noticeable on the eastern horizon, and at length sufficient light was shed upon the scene to remind the travelers that a new day was at hand.

They accordingly extinguished their lanterns, returning them to the capacious pockets from which they had been taken.

By the time their eyes had become accustomed to this change, the light in the eastern sky had grown strong enough to reveal their surroundings with something like distinctness.

"This is more like it," then said Buffalo Bill, with an air of relief. "We shall now be able to see where we are going, and can avoid disagreeable encounters."

"Yes, we're well 'out of the woods' now, Bill," returned Ben Letts, in a tone which attested how heavily the cares and anxieties of the night had rested upon him. "There is little likelihood that Mrs. Goggin and her friends, even if they were to see through the trick we have played upon them, would be able to place themselves between us and the fort!"

"No, Ben, we're all right now," affirmed Buffalo Bill, moderating his pace. "We can proceed more at our leisure."

A groan came from Budd Finklestone at this juncture, and it was echoed by Private Hillyer, as before.

"What! more trouble?" inquired Buffalo Bill, turning in his saddle.

The prisoner nodded.

"Your gag hurts, perhaps?"

Another nod, Private Hillyer joining.

"I presume you'd like to say something?"

Both prisoners signified an affirmative with all possible vigor.

"That is only natural, I must confess," commented Buffalo Bill, "but you'll have to excuse us from complying with your demand."

The prisoners shook their heads.

"You can't and won't excuse us?"

The response was an earnest negative.

"But you'll have to excuse us," insisted Buffalo Bill. "The truth is, we cannot take any chances of allowing you to summon assistance, in case an opportunity should be afforded you of making us trouble. An hour hence, or when we are within a reasonable distance of the fort, we may be able to show you the consideration demanded, but just now it is out of the question."

The prisoners shook their heads again.

"Do you mean to insist on that point, after what I've said?" added the scout.

Another negative.

"You want something, perhaps?"

An earnest affirmative.

"A drink of water?"

The affirmative became still more emphatic.

"Is that all?"

A prompt negative.

"Oh, I see!" cried Ben Letts. "You wish to have breakfast?"

Very emphatic affirmations were given by the prisoners to this question, with thumps of their knees upon their saddles.

"Exactly; there is food in your saddlebags," remarked Buffalo Bill, looking from one to the other; "but, after the feasting which took place in the guard-house just before mid-

night, we can't really take it for granted that you are already on the verge of starvation!"

"It is out of the question that we should bother with their breakfast—or our own, for that matter," declared Ben Letts, with unqualified emphasis. "We must not delay so long, nor can we allow them the freedom of their tongues. Besides, we must either feed them, or untie their hands to allow of their feeding themselves, and I've no intention of showing them either of these favors!"

"Certainly not," confirmed Buffalo Bill. "There's no use of talking about it."

He faced to the front and chirped to his horse, thus indicating to the prisoners that their plea was indeed definitely rejected.

The awful scowls he left behind him will be readily comprehended. Both prisoners strained at their bonds until the veins on their foreheads stood out like whip-cords, and the hue of their faces became almost as dark as that of a man in an apoplectic fit. But their rage and self-torture did not help them.

"The truth is, Bill," whispered Ben, leaning close to his ally, "I don't propose to give the rascals the least chance of escape. It has cost me no little worry to reflect that Budd is acquainted with that girl and knows where she is to be found. Might he not molest her if he were to recover his freedom?"

"He certainly seemed to give her a great deal of attention," returned Buffalo Bill. "He watched you both as a cat watches a mouse. But he won't escape us!"

"I hope not, Bill. But—hark! what's that?" He drew rein abruptly, with a startled look, and his ally did likewise.

A clatter of hoofs sounded unmistakably on their hearing. It was exactly ahead of them and approaching rapidly.

"What can it be?" asked Ben.

"It can only be that Colonel Nayler has sent a detachment to our assistance," suggested Buffalo Bill.

"But they ride like men who know their road, Bill!" cried Ben. "And their road—it is that of Budd and his sister. What if the new-comers should be their friends?"

"How could they be?"

"Easily enough! Sam Gaddley and Hank Tilkins may have again made their escape, considering the friends they left behind them and the utter demoralization of the garrison!"

"True! We must bide!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A VERY CLOSE SHAVE.

THE two scouts lost no time in exchanging the open in which they found themselves for a nook behind the nearest bushes and trees.

They had barely time to notice that there was a considerable cliff to their rear and a beautiful spring and brook of running water in front of them, midway between their hiding-place and the trail they had vacated, when the horsemen they had heard came dashing into view.

The scouts had already decided, from the sounds and echoes reaching their ears, that the new-comers were not more than two in number, and they were not at all surprised to see that these two were old acquaintances.

They were, in fact, the two ex-cavalrymen with whom the scouts had already had such close dealings—Sam Gaddley and Hank Tilkins! The couple they had captured at the instant of their descent from the northeast angle of the fort, and whose places they had taken on the ride from the fort to the secret camp!

Despite all the scouts had said to each other in the consultation last recorded about the possibility of such an event, they were none the less disagreeably affected to see their anticipations thus transformed into a reality.

The two ex-cavalrymen were in the best of spirits, as could have been seen by a glance at their faces, which fairly glowed with jubilant excitement, it was so nice to be free again, and so sweet to have given their enemies such a keen disappointment.

A few additional bounds of their jaded steeds brought the new-comers abreast of the spot at which the scouts were concealed, and then Sam Gaddley suddenly set the example of drawing rein, looking critically at the clear, pebbly brook crossing the trail, and then running his glance along its course to the spring.

"Yes, this is the spot, Hank," he exclaimed, bringing his horse to a walk and leaping lightly to the ground. "There is the Aztec Spring, of which I was speaking. There's no better water anywhere. We must halt long enough to give our horses and ourselves a good taste of it."

"I'm quite willing," rejoined Hank Tilkins, as he also drew rein and dismounted. "I never wanted a drink worse, and as to our horses—see! how eager they are!"

"We've made quick time," said Sam, looking at his watch, while the horses plunged their noses into a crystal pool and began drinking greedily. "We've been only an hour and forty minutes in coming from the fort."

"Quick work, indeed!" commented Hank. "But I dare say we have by this time been missed. Neither Dimnick nor Nayler would long leave us out of their sight."

"True, Hank, but even if they missed us an hour ago," said Sam, "they'll not be able to overhaul us; not even if they instantly discovered what direction we have taken. We've ridden too fast for that."

He felt of the flanks of his panting steed, drawing its nose definitely out of the water, and added:

"They're quite hot. We must not let them drink too much."

He led his horse away from the brook, hitching him to a sapling close at hand, and his associate followed his example.

"They really ought to rest a moment," suggested the latter, leading the way toward the spring. "We've pushed them too hard, I think."

"Let them breathe a minute," replied Sam carelessly. "They'll go all the further for it." The two men proceeded to quench their thirst leisurely, and then seated themselves upon a grassy bank beside the spring, with the intention of having a further and final drink from it before resuming their journey. Both looked around sharply, loosening their revolvers in their belts, but they did not unslung their rifles from their shoulders.

The spot where they sat was not exactly under the gaze of Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts, inasmuch as the latter were concealed, but the scouts were nevertheless scarcely a dozen rods from it—so near, in fact, that they had readily overheard every word of the preceding conversation.

It had been overheard, too, by the prisoners, and it will readily be imagined what effect such a close proximity of their friends had upon them.

But Buffalo Bill had promptly taken a position beside Budd Finklestone, covering his too active brain with a revolver, while Ben Letts had been equally prompt to place himself in a like attitude beside Private Hillyer.

The scouts had realized, of course, that a single groan, of the sort the prisoners had been uttering, and were still able to utter, despite the gags in their mouths, would be quite enough to attract the attention of the new-comers, and they did not propose to allow any such hint of their presence to be given.

"Not a word now," enjoined Buffalo Bill, in one of those low, concentrated tones which speak of a deadly resolution. "We don't propose to lose you because of this passing encounter! You are ours, living or dead—just as you choose! At the least attempt to communicate with your friends, we'll kill both you and them!"

The threat of Buffalo Bill, with the certainty of its execution, had the desired effect upon Budd Finklestone, as was natural.

In fact, Budd had too much sense, not to say too much experience with violence, to be in any doubt as to the consequences of his disobedience, and he bowed his head repeatedly in token of submission, at the same time ordering Private Hillyer by a nod to conform to the example thus set him.

In a single instant, therefore, the crisis in which we left the scouts had been safely weathered.

But the prisoners none the less kept their eyes fixed in the direction of their friends, and listened eagerly to the conversation that succeeded.

"Well, Hank," resumed Sam Gaddley, with a long sigh of relief, "we're now fairly clear of drill and guard duty, and I propose to make this leave-taking final."

"The same here, Sam!"

"The truth is," pursued Gaddley, "we've run too many risks already. Just think of the surprise those infernal scouts gave us at the very moment we thought we were getting away! It's only because Dick Rasker happened to be placed on guard over us that we are now free!"

"Yes, and he would have had no chance to help us if any one of a dozen points had been different," returned Hank Tilkins. "Like you, Sam, I've played soldier long enough, and now propose to go to the 'Quadrangle' and take comfort."

"Such is also the cap'n's intention," said Sam, thoughtfully. "His masquerade at the fort has been a success, and he's now ready to reap his harvest. He said yesterday, in so many words, that there'll be another raid of hostiles soon, and that this time it'll be a raid of real red-skins."

"Indeed? At that rate, Sam," said Hank, "he'll soon be known as the most dangerous man in the Rockies."

"Oh, he's the coming terror," remarked Gaddley, contentedly. "He's going to blow up the fort, and wipe out everything near it, including the village. Little Elk and a hundred warriors will help him."

"But may not Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts get hold of him?" demanded Hank, arising to take another drink from the spring.

Sam's face clouded.

"There is indeed danger of that," he declared, thoughtfully. "To begin with, they hoped to see and hear a great deal about the Ravagers before daylight—"

"Yes, or they wouldn't have allowed the cap'n to leave the fort," interrupted Hank. "They

knew he was going, and could have stopped him and the whole party. They knew all about the tunnel, but they let him run to see where he'd go and what he'd do! That point gained, they'll gather him in again and the whole band with him. Don't you see? When they leave that crowd—which they must have done before now—they'll bring the cap'n away with them!"

"By thunder! that's only too likely and too possible!" cried Sam, excitedly. "Let's have another drink, and push on to the Crater Camp!"

The proposition was instantly acted upon, and the couple vanished at a gallop.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE RAVAGERS EXCITED.

THE more the two ex-cavalrymen reflected upon the matter, the more clearly did they realize that their leader was likely to be in trouble.

They were accordingly ready, when they struck the trail left by the scouts and their prisoners, to take due notice of it.

Even in the dull, bleared light of that lowering morning, those tracks of the four horses going to the eastward—and consequently counter to those left by the fugitives—stood out with startling distinctness.

"Look, Hank!" exclaimed Sam Gaddley, drawing rein and dismounting. "Here you have it. Four horses have gone east, and two of them were evidently led, as their tracks are too near those of the other pair to admit of their having traveled abreast. See?"

Tilkins assented, with an excitement as great as that of his companion.

"Quick, then!" cried Sam, regaining his saddle. "Let's go over the distance between here and the Crater Camp as soon as possible."

They pressed their pace accordingly, scarcely exchanging another word until they had reached their destination.

The clatter with which they finished the last half-mile of their ride was quite sufficient to arouse the liveliest curiosity of their friends, who had all turned out with the first gleams of day, and were in the act of taking their breakfast, which included several choice morsels of game, which had been secured by the more enterprising members of the party.

"That must be my brother," said Mrs. Goggin, as she arose hastily, with a flush of joyous expectancy, and stepped toward the dangerous passageway by which the secret camp was reached, as related in a former page. "Don't you think so, Josh?"

"I shall be very glad if it is," returned Josh Reeder, with a dubious shake of the head, as he drew the arm of Mrs. Goggin within his own. "But I still have my misgivings. I can't believe the cap'n would have taken leave of us in that way without saying a word, and leaving that scrap of paper stuck on a stick to inform us of his departure."

"But he may have had his reasons, as I keep telling you," returned Mrs. Goggin.

"Let's wait and see, Dollie."

The horsemen were soon near enough to be recognized, and the flush upon the face of Mrs. Goggin deepened intensely.

"They're Sam and Hank!" she announced, waving her handkerchief to the new-comers. "But where is my brother?"

She could hardly wait for the two men to ride into the camp.

"Where is the cap'n?" she demanded, remaining rooted to the spot, unable to advance and greet them.

"I don't know," replied Sam, slipping to the ground, with an inquiring glance at his panting and foaming steed, and refraining from the least hint of what he knew and feared. "Isn't he here?"

"No. Didn't he go away with you?" asked Josh Reeder, remarking that Mrs. Goggin was literally gasping for breath.

"With me? I go away with him?"

"Yes, you and Hank!"

"We haven't seen him," replied Sam Gaddley, looking nearly as bewildered as his questioners with the state of affairs thus presented.

"Then what is the meaning of this word he left me?" asked Mrs. Goggin, rallying, as she drew a slip of paper from her pocket and extended it to the new-comers. "Quick! what does this mean?"

The two ex-cavalrymen cast swift glances over the slip of paper, and then recoiled in consternation, Sam exclaiming:

"It means that you have been cheated by Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts, who have captured the cap'n and carried him off with them!"

"Buffalo Bill?" gasped Mrs. Goggin.

"Ben Letts?" cried Josh Reeder. "Then you didn't go away with the cap'n?"

"We go away with him?" roared Hank Tilkins, with an oath. "How could we? We haven't been here till now!"

"Then where on earth have you been?" demanded Mrs. Goggin, looking more and more bewildered.

"We've been in irons and in Fort Harris until nearly daybreak," replied Sam. "We didn't come here with you—no! We were captured by Ben Letts and Buffalo Bill as we descended from the northeast angle of the fort, and were

at once conveyed inside by Corporal Dimmick and others in waiting!"

"Then you didn't come here with us?" gasped Mrs. Goggin, looking ready to sink to the ground.

"That's what I'm telling you—no! A million times no! The men who came here in your company were Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts! They took our places, and came all the way here with you!"

"And heard all that was said," howled Josh Reeder, dropping the arm of Mrs. Goggin and stepping about with the air of being panic-stricken. "They rode next behind you and the cap'n, Dollie! I noticed they acted queerly, and thought they didn't look quite like Sam and Hank! I see it all now, Dollie!"

"Well, it's a pity you didn't see it a little sooner," returned Mrs. Goggin, almost angrily. "I can now see it, too! Those men fell to the rear when we reached this camp, and were the last to remain outside—the very last, with the exception of Private Hillyer!"

"Then all is clear," cried Reeder. "Those infernal intruders have played their game well! Knowing that they could not come into the heart of the camp without being recognized, they remained the other side of the bridge, and have captured your brother, Dollie, and carried him off with them!"

It was only too evident.

Mrs. Goggin wrestled with the terrible conviction in silence.

"And with them has gone Private Hillyer," added Reeder. "The two scouts and their two prisoners are by this time in Fort Harris!"

"By thunder! you're right!" cried Sam Gaddley, bringing his hand down on his thigh fiercely. "Hank and I struck their trail just this side of the 'Aztec Spring'—the trail of four horses going eastward. What's more, we at once leaped to the conclusion that the cap'n had been captured, and that's why we've ridden so rapidly."

"But how came you here after being captured a second time?" asked Josh Reeder.

"Oh, Dick Rasker set us free, he having been put in charge of us," answered Sam, "and he and Stubby Jobson will be this way in the course of the morning. But about the cap'n—"

"We must fly to his rescue," exclaimed Mrs. Goggin, dashing the tears from her eyes. "Is there not a chance, Josh, that we may overtake him before he reaches the fort?"

"A very poor one, if any, Dollie," was the answer. "Still, the four horse trail was not seen the other side of the 'Aztec Spring.' If we start immediately, and the scouts should meet Little Elk coming north, or have other drawbacks, we may possibly overhaul them, as they can't go at full speed with those led horses!"

"Quick, then! Let's be off!" proposed Mrs. Goggin, with the eagerness of a wild hope. "Let's rescue my brother, even if we have to smuggle ourselves into the fort to do it, and let's also take a terrible revenge on that vile Ben Letts and Buffalo Bill!"

The entire crowd was prompt to respond to this appeal, and in a few minutes more were rapidly leaving the Crater Camp behind them.

"There is of course no occasion to be worried about the cap'n," assured Josh Reeder, as he took his place beside Mrs. Goggin. "Even if they get him back into the guard-house we can readily get into the fort to-night in sufficient numbers to save him."

"Or if not, we'll send the fort and everybody in it to kingdom come!" declared Mrs. Goggin, in the accents of a deadly resolve. "We'll either save my brother, or avenge him!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

BUDD'S UNAVAILING FURY.

THE emotions with which Buffalo Bill and Ben Letts, in their covert near the Aztec Spring, had listened to the conversation of Sam Gaddley and Hank Tilkins, were equaled only by those of Budd Finklestone.

He looked as if his friends had caught him in a coffin and were endeavoring to close the lid upon him.

How pale and red his face grew by turns at the revelations of Hank Tilkins! With what wrath and disgust he inclined his ear in the direction of the speakers!

If looks could have killed, they would have died under his gaze.

Thus watching and listening, he obeyed the injunctions of his captors, as did Private Hillyer, until the two ex-cavalrymen had taken their departure, and then he gave vent to his pent up feelings in a long and dismal groan.

"I must say, Finklestone," observed Buffalo Bill, contemplating him with a smile of intense satisfaction, "that they do not give you a very excellent character!"

Budd tossed his head disdainfully, as if to say that he was not responsible for the views of others.

"Nevertheless," suggested the scout, "they seem to have got you down to a fine point. Are you really the head of the Ravagers, as Hank Tilkins asserted?"

The prisoner shook his head with prompt and angry vigor.

"And didn't you have a hand in the raids to which they alluded?"

Another shake.

"And didn't you say yesterday that another raid—and one of real red-skins—would soon be forthcoming?"

The prisoner tossed his head impatiently, as if to say that all such accusations were beneath his notice, and that he didn't propose to give them a thought.

"Well, they've certainly given me a new idea of you," declared the scout, "and I'm more and more pleased every moment with the liberty I took last evening of placing myself in your company without an invitation. Isn't this your view, Ben?"

"It is, Bill," answered Ben emphatically. "I wouldn't let this fellow slip through our fingers for a million of dollars!"

"Nor would I, Ben. I have no doubt those ex-cavalrymen have reached the correct view of him."

The effect of these confidences upon Budd Finklestone was at least suggestive. He not only writhed anew in his bonds, but his face darkened intensely with guilty and desperate passions.

"And now to get him safely hived," added Buffalo Bill, with smiling content, as he led the way toward the spring and brook. "Let's water the horses and be off."

The scouts were soon in motion with their prisoners, but a shadow continued to rest upon the face of Buffalo Bill.

"I can't tell you, Ben," he declared, after a brief pause, "how anxious I was during those critical moments. It's very seldom that horses will meet in that way without a whinny being uttered on one side or the other."

"You think the horses, then—"

"Certainly. They did not remain ignorant of their near approach, and it's the strangest thing in the world that a whinny from one side or the other didn't give us away!"

"Well, all this only proves how lucky we are, Bill," suggested Ben Letts, with a smile.

"Perhaps so, but let us hope to be spared all further risks of that nature, for we shall never be favored twice in this way, you may be certain."

Striking a smart gallop, the scouts held to their course a couple of miles without speaking.

"Perhaps you wondered, Ben," then said Buffalo Bill, as they allowed their horses to walk at the rise of a short crest, "that I didn't suggest the capture of those fellows?"

"Not at all, Bill," was the answer. "I think our hands are full already."

"True, Ben, but that isn't quite all my reason for doing as I did. Besides bearing in mind to 'let well enough alone,' and remembering that 'a bird in hand is worth two in the bush,' I also reflected that the capture of those two men was a serious undertaking. If we had taken a step in that direction, our prisoners would have groaned their very loudest, and that would have put the ex-cavalrymen on their guard. Next, if we had given our attention to the proposed capture, our prisoners would have made an effort—and a successful one, no doubt, with the aid of a few shots—to stampede their horses. And, finally, those two men, with rifles in their hands and a good tree or rock between them and us, could have certainly made us trouble."

"I felt that way, Bill, without having thought it out so fully," said Ben, "and I must add that I am glad you adjourned the capture of that couple to some more favorable moment. But what if a whinny had announced our presence, Bill?"

"Well, in that case," was the response, "there would have been a very serious scrimmage this morning at 'Aztec Spring.' As to just how it would have ended, I will not undertake to say, but I think the Ravagers would have sustained an irreparable loss!"

A hollow, snarling sort of groan came from Budd Finklestone at this juncture, and it was echoed by Private Hillyer, both prisoners shaking their heads vigorously.

"He means to say, I presume," interpreted Ben Letts, "that we have no right to imply that he is either the head or a member of the Ravagers!"

This view was confirmed by a succession of emphatic nods from both prisoners.

"Well, he can save his powder," returned Buffalo Bill, with smiling scorn. "We can take no stock whatever in his denials. I have no doubt he's the chief agent of all the violence and crime we've undertaken to wipe out!"

A veritable explosion of furious groans came from Budd Finklestone at this avowal.

"How angry he is!" Ben could not help saying. "He must hate us like poison!"

This view was fiercely confirmed.

"He hopes to get square with us sooner or later!" pursued Ben, scrutinizing the prisoner.

More confirmations.

"He'll burn us alive if he ever gets the chance!" added Ben.

Furious nods succeeded.

Buffalo Bill smiled contemptuously, but he could reply, his face told upon a report

horsemen who had just come into view a score of rods ahead, and were approaching at such an easy pace that no hint had previously been given of their presence.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ESTHER'S REJECTED SUITOR.

THE approaching horsemen were three in number.

The one who took the lead appeared to be about five and twenty years of age, and could have been best described as a rural dude, he carrying a fancy riding-whip and wearing gloves, an eye-glass, a profusion of curls and jewelry, and a suit of check flannel, cut tight and short.

His bearing was conceited and affected, as also overbearing and insolent, a not uncommon conjunction.

His appearance suggested wealth, but was still more strongly indicative of dissipation.

Handsome but tough would have summarized the impression he would have produced at an ordinary county fair.

Just behind this singular-looking personage rode two men of middle age, of coarse aspect and coarsely attired, and so freighted with tobacco that it appeared on their chins and shirt-fronts, as well as on their beards and in the corners of their mouths. They were armed with rifles and revolvers, like their leader, and were figuring as deputy-sheriffs.

They appeared to ride a little to the rear not merely out of deference for their companion, but for a variety of other reasons, among which was the exchange of various ideas and sentiments with which their leader had nothing in common.

The first glance of the scouts took in the number of the new-comers, the second their aspect, and the third their bearing, and the impression resulting from this survey was one of quiet indifference, so that they continued to advance precisely as they had been going.

Not so the new-comers.

At sight of the scouts and their prisoners, the rural dude started as if alarmed, and drew rein with such violence as to cause his horse to rear, at the same time appealing to his associates by word and look to give him their opinion of what they saw ahead of them.

This opinion was evidently of a tranquilizing nature, for the trio resumed progress, and the two parties were promptly within speaking distance.

Not wishing to be delayed, the scouts saluted the strangers by raising their hats politely, but without drawing rein, and would have passed without speaking if left entirely to their original intentions.

The new-comers, however, did not content themselves with returning these salutations, but drew rein a little nervously, with an air which showed that they desired to ask a few questions.

"I beg pardon for troubling you, strangers," said the rural dude, in a clear but squeaky voice, "but we'd like to know where we are, if you can tell us."

The scouts drew rein, and Buffalo Bill pointed out briefly the whereabouts of the anxious inquirer.

"So far from Fort Harris!" was his comment. "Who made all those tracks ahead of us?"

"They were made, sir," answered Buffalo Bill, "by a band of robbers and deserters!"

The dude paled at the information.

"And you've been hunting them, gentlemen?" he continued, with swift glances from one prisoner to the other.

"We have, sir!" replied Buffalo Bill.

"And captured two of them, I suppose?"

"As you see, sir."

"What a wild country!" commented the dude. "Is it safe to ride further in this direction?"

"That may depend upon who you are and what you're doing," replied Buffalo Bill. "There has been some violence threatened hereabouts, but you needn't run till you see the enemy."

"I—I beg to ask your advice," stammered the dude, "as you are evidently posted, and also reliable. We're all the way from Kentucky—"

"And deputy-sheriffs," announced one of his henchmen.

"And are looking for a man?" supplemented the second deputy-sheriff.

"Or rather for a whole family," explained the dude, excitedly—"a father, son, and daughter—"

"For a moonshiner and assassin," declared the first deputy.

"For a fugitive from justice," exclaimed the second deputy, striking his breast-pocket significantly, "and we've got the gov'nor's requisition right here for him!"

"And we propose to find him," avowed the dude, with vicious energy. "He has been tracked clear across the country to Durango and Fort Harris, and has been seen by one of our detectives at the latter place and traced in this direction!"

"Did you mention the name?" asked Ben

Letts, taking part suddenly in the conversation, with a tone and mien which attested a keen interest in it.

"His name is Clewson—Irby Clewson," replied the dude. "His son is named Ben, and the girl's name is Esther!"

The scouts exchanged startled glances, realizing on the instant that the family threatened by these new-comers was that of the fair girl who had just been their guide!

"What has the father done?" resumed Ben Letts, to whom Buffalo Bill naturally left the inquiry.

"Done? He nearly killed me," responded the dude, with a sudden glow of wrath and malignancy. "He sent an ounce-ball clear through my body!"

"For what reason? What provocation did you give him?" pursued Ben.

"Well—I had paid some attention to his daughter—"

"Or tried to!" amended the first henchman.

"Or wooed her with a little too much vigor!" explained the second deputy, with a laugh.

"And the father forbade you his house?" continued Ben Letts, with a grim sort of smile.

"Or rather his shanty," smilingly corrected the first deputy. "He was a moonshiner, and lived in a hut in the mountains!"

"At any rate, he told you to stay away, as the daughter had previously told you?"

"Yes—he did, sir!"

"But you intruded again and he shot you?"

"He did, sir, but I've had him indicted. The county judge is a particular friend of my family, and we propose to make it hot for the old outlaw, if we can find him! I've already spent more than a thousand dollars in the chase!"

"What! for such a man as that?" exclaimed Buffalo Bill, exchanging a glance of secret intelligence with Ben.

"Oh, it isn't so much the old man as the daughter that I wish to get hold of," explained the dude, with smiling insolence. "I've had the son indicted as accessory, and both as moonshiners, and they'll be out of the way for many a long year after I get hold of them, and I shall then have a clear field with the girl!"

"Exactly," returned Ben Letts. "But you've not yet found them!"

"No, but they can't be far distant. Have you ever heard of them?"

"Not a word till this day," replied Ben. "I presume you'd pay big money for any information about them?"

"I would indeed," assured the dude.

"Well, we'll bear in mind what you've told us," said Ben, gathering up his reins, "and shall be pleased to keep track of you. You will return to Fort Harris, I suppose?"

"Certainly, this afternoon. We're stopping at the 'Rancher's Saloon.' My name is Purkitt—Hamilton Purkitt—and these gentlemen are brothers named Hayter. If you can do anything for us, gentlemen, I will reward you liberally. Meanwhile, is it safe for us to push on further? I ask because we've seen two or three suspicious-looking parties hovering near us."

"No, it's not safe, Mr. Purkitt—since you ask our opinion—for you to take a step further in this direction," assured Ben Letts, with an earnestness about which there could be no question. "You have probably heard of the Ravagers?"

"As who hasn't!" returned Purkitt, excitedly.

"Well, you may encounter a dozen or twenty of them at any moment," announced Ben, with grim impressiveness. "But that's a minor peril, as they'd simply take your arms and money and clothes, and let you go back to the fort in the style of Adam. What you have really to fear is this: We hear Little Elk and a hundred braves are about to go upon the war-path in this very vicinity, and if they get hold of you, Mr. Purkitt, you'll never see Kentucky again."

The dude became ghastly white, and hastened to force his horse in the direction the scouts were going, as did his deputy-sheriffs.

"As to the Clewsons," added Ben, "I will only say that they've found friends—friends who are posted about you and your motives, Mr. Purkitt—and that your life wouldn't be worth the sixteenth part of a cent if you were to intrude in any way upon that girl."

"Just what we've been telling him all day yesterday and all night," exclaimed the first deputy, with an oath of grim contentment.

"And now I hope he'll see things as they are!" growled the second deputy.

"I do indeed," acknowledged Purkitt, in a voice rendered more squeaky than ever by his apprehensions. "We'll get out of this, gentlemen, as quick as we can!"

"Sensible at last!" cried the first deputy. "In what direction is the fort, stranger?"

Ben hastened to give him full directions.

"Thanks," cried Purkitt. "We won't wait to keep you company, as you're considerably hampered by those prisoners. Good-morning, gentlemen."

"Good-morning!" echoed from both sides.

And the dude and his henchmen rode away at a lively pace, without as much as a single glance of regret behind them.

The scouts exchanged congratulatory glances. They felt that they had done an excellent thing in taking the part of the Clewsons, and down deep in his own soul Ben Letts had a conviction that he had also been fighting his own battle.

CHAPTER XXXVII. AFFAIRS AT THE FORT.

CONTINUING to ride rapidly, the scouts reached the fort by the time the dark, sunless morning had fully dawned, and were admitted by Captain Greyson in person.

Not much to their surprise, they found Colonel Naylor awaiting them just within the entrance, after a few hours of that refreshing sleep all army officers learn to take so readily whenever an opportunity is offered them.

The delight he experienced at sight of Budd Finklestone very naturally found expression in the greetings and congratulations with which he received the successful masqueraders.

"I suspected you'd be here early with good news," he declared, "and that's why you find me waiting. As to this man," and he glanced at the crestfallen Finklestone, "I propose to anchor him so that he will stay."

Summoning Dimmick, who was in waiting, with the stripes of an orderly upon his sleeve, the commandant ordered the gags to be removed from the mouths of the prisoners, who were then sent to the forge under strong guard to be heavily ironed.

"Of course Hillyer is of no account," remarked the colonel, when the couple were out of hearing, "but I may induce him, by this sort of pressure, to tell us what he knows about the Ravagers in general and about Budd in particular. A fine lot of horses," he added, looking them over with a critical eye. "You took them from Budd and his friends, I suppose, gentlemen?"

"We did, colonel," replied Ben Letts. "This bay, in fact, was ridden by Finklestone himself."

"We would like them to have the best of care," said Buffalo Bill, "as we propose to use them the next time we leave the fort."

"You are quite right to retain them, gentlemen," observed the colonel—"at least until they are claimed by some more legitimate owner than Budd Finklestone."

He lost no time in sending the horses away to his own stable, with careful instructions, and then invited his guests into the parlor, in which a bright fire was burning. Mrs. Naylor appeared, but remained barely long enough to greet the scouts and congratulate them upon their success, and then hurried to the kitchen to give additional orders for breakfast.

"How far did you go?" demanded the colonel, as the trio sat down.

"To a remarkable ancient crater some seventeen miles due west of us," answered Buffalo Bill, making use of the information Finklestone had given him.

"I know the place," said the colonel. "It was shown to me by an old trapper who used to haunt that region, and I even passed a night there with him, when I was still a captain. But what took you in that direction?"

"Oh, the place is now used as halting-place by the Ravagers," explained Buffalo Bill.

"Budd and his followers went there as direct as if they had been shot out of a cannon!"

"Did you learn anything from their movements and discussions, as you thought you would?"

"A great deal, colonel."

"Please give me the particulars."

Buffalo Bill did so, dwelling particularly upon the fact that the headquarters of the Ravagers was at the "Quadrangle," and that this retreat was probably in the extreme southwest corner of the State, adjoining Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona. The reasons he advanced in favor of this theory had great weight with the colonel.

"It is certainly a point to be investigated as soon as possible," concluded the commandant, after a brief discussion, "and of course I shall leave this investigation in your hands. But give me a fuller idea of your journey with the Ravagers."

Continuing, at a silent request of his associate, Buffalo Bill related all that happened since he and Ben took the places of Sam Gaddley and Hank Tilkins, giving especial prominence to the ride to the Crater Camp, the capture of Finklestone and Hillyer, and the events of their return, including their encounter with the mysterious unknown and his daughter.

"That 'unknown' moonshiner," remarked the colonel, not much to Ben's surprise, but somewhat to his confusion. "I have been aware of his existence and whereabouts for a couple of weeks past, and should have sent a squad after him before now if the Ravagers had made me less trouble. He's 'wanted' in Kentucky, however, on a very serious charge, and the prospect is that he'll soon be outside of my jurisdiction, as two or three deputy-sheriffs passed through here yesterday on their way to him."

Ben Letts flushed at these observations, but he did not care to continue the subject.

"Has anything new happened here in our absence, colonel?" he asked.

"Nothing very important," was the answer. "Still, here are one or two points. I have searched the house of Mrs. Goggin thoroughly, as you suggested before leaving, and have found a letter which may be useful. Here it is."

He passed it to Buffalo Bill, who read it aloud.

It was as follows:

"WEDNESDAY, the 13th.

"DEAR DOLLIE:—

"I wish to see you and Dorus immediately, or at least one of you. Do not fail to come.

"MOTHER."

The scouts exchanged gratified glances, and then turned to the colonel, who cried:

"Ah! it strikes you as important?"

"Very," answered Buffalo Bill. "Dollie is Mrs. Goggin, and Dorus is Finklestone! They called each other by these names all the while we were with them. It appears from this letter that they are really brother and sister, and that their mother is living."

"Excellent! You'd better keep the letter for future reference," said the colonel.

Ben Letts extended his hand for the letter with a preoccupied air, and secured it in one of his pockets.

"The only other incident worthy of a mention," continued the colonel, "is the escape of Sam Gaddley and Hank Tilkins, with the assistance of Dick Rasker and Stubby Jobson, and you seem to have known of this event almost as soon as we did. But the two latter are now in irons in the guard-house, in the places of the two they released, and much good may it do them!"

"But what about Sir Hornby Finklestone, colonel?" asked Buffalo Bill. "Has he come out of that swoon, or what not, and given you an explanation of his journey to Colorado and of his relations to Budd Finklestone?"

The colonel's face clouded.

Ere another word could be said, however, Dr. Pawlett, the post surgeon, came hurriedly into the room, coatless and breathless, with a face that was fiery red with some great shock, and with the air of being indescribably startled.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE CAPTURED DESERTER.

To say it all in a word, the doctor was in a state of bewildering excitement.

"Ah, there you are, colonel!" he cried, as he caught sight of the commandant, and, hardly noticing the presence of the scouts, he continued:

"You could never guess what has happened. Sir Hornby has disappeared!"

"Disappeared!" echoed the commandant, gaining his feet as if electrified, as did the scouts. "Why, he must have stepped out to take a look at the fort or the village!"

"No, colonel!" assured the doctor, wringing his hands. "I've looked, and had others looking. There's no trace of him anywhere. He couldn't be more completely out of the way if the earth had opened to swallow him! Come and see!"

He turned and fled.

Inviting the scouts by a gesture to accompany him, the colonel led the way rapidly up-stairs, hastening to verify the surprising news by a personal inspection of the scene of the baronet's disappearance.

It was a handsome chamber over the parlor, and had been assigned to Sir Hornby, it will be remembered, after a first treatment had been given to his injuries in the colonel's own bedroom.

"And this is the route he must have taken," said the commandant, raising the curtains of one of the windows, which was found to be open.

"Sure enough!" said the scouts in chorus.

"This side of the house being in the shadow," pursued the commandant, "Sir Hornby was able to lower himself from this window unseen, the three sentries I posted with special reference to his safe-keeping being at the three doors, front and rear and the other side. But why should he take leave of us in such an unceremonious fashion? Is he out of his head, doctor?"

"I think not," answered Dr. Pawlett. "To the contrary, he had recovered his senses, and had asked a few questions, besides making some allusion to the lateness of the hour."

"But you haven't had a chance to question him, I suppose, in regard to his relations to Budd Finklestone, if we may still speak of this fraud by that name?" queried the colonel.

"No, sir—nor about anything else. He was so weak and nervous and upset—so nearly out of his head, in fact—that I should have been violating the first principles of my professional duty to have questioned him, or allowed him to be questioned. I wanted him to get at least a short natural sleep, with the benefit of the medicine I had given him, before proceeding to the inquiry suggested. To this end, I had sent away all watchers and attendants, and had

thrown myself down for a nap on a lounge in the adjacent bedroom."

"And so it is impossible to say just how or when he vanished," commented the commandant, in a voice indicative of the keenest regret. "But one thing is clear—his disappearance is in no sense the work of Budd Finklestone. Having been otherwise accounted for, Budd can have had no chance, Mr. Cody, to carry out the intention you heard him expressing."

"That's clear enough, colonel," returned Buffalo Bill. "But how is it that no one has seen the baronet pass the gate or the wall? Let's make search within the fort, and inquire."

The proposition was duly acted upon, but nothing came of it. The fact of the baronet's disappearance from the fort, as well as from the colonel's house, was further and fully established, but not the least clue was gained as to why, where, or how the distinguished gentleman had vanished.

"Well, this is awkward enough," commented the commandant, when he and the scouts had returned to the parlor, and Dr. Pawlett had gone away by himself to continue the inquiry in the village or elsewhere. "I so much wanted to hear what he had to say! What can have been his motive in taking such a secret and untimely start?"

"There are several explanations, colonel," suggested Buffalo Bill, thoughtfully. "The baronet may still be out of his head, and under the impression that he is flying for his life, as he certainly was at the moment of his advent. Or he may have heard that Budd Finklestone is in high favor here, and so felt that he had got out of the frying-pan into the fire! Or, possibly, he may have pressing business or outside connections of which we know nothing."

"In any case, he's out of our keeping for the present," concluded the colonel, regretfully. "It only remains to turn our attention upon other matters. To begin with, Mr. Cody, you and Ben must get to bed soon, and spend a good share of the day in sleep!"

This suggestion was perfectly in harmony with the wishes and intentions of the scouts, as they were conscious of needing such a preparation for their proposed visit to the mysterious headquarters of the Ravagers.

"All right, colonel," replied Buffalo Bill, after consulting Ben with a glance. "We'll take the rest suggested, if you'll send a detachment under Captain Greyson or some other competent leader to seize Mrs. Goggin and her friends at the Crater, in case they are still there."

"It shall be done, Mr. Cody," returned the colonel. "Possibly I'll go myself, as I need a change from the close confinement of the last week or two. Be that as it may, the force in question shall start immediately. Ah, breakfast," he added, catching sight of a gesture from his wife, who had been busy in the dining-room. "Come, gentlemen."

The scouts followed him to the table, taking their places.

They ate rather lightly, as was their wont in grave circumstances, and then took their way to the side veranda with the colonel to enjoy a cigar and start their digestion before retiring to their slumbers.

They had barely seated themselves, however, in the rustic arm-chairs at their disposal, when the colonel saw his new orderly approaching from the direction of the main entrance of the fort.

"If you please, colonel," announced Dimmick, "Sheriff Watrous is here, and is very anxious to see you."

"Let him come in, Dimmick."

"That's what I've done, sir. As I know you always receive him, whatever may be the pressure of business, I have passed him in with his deputies."

"That crowd at the gate?" interrupted the colonel, looking in the direction indicated.

"Yes, sir. They bring a captured deserter, who has been shot and is dying, and who has very important revelations to make to you concerning Budd Finklestone."

"All right, Dimmick," returned the commandant, motioning the orderly to remain, and arising and leading the way from the veranda. "Come, gentlemen," and he beckoned to the scouts. "I dare say the promised revelations will prove to be of as much interest to you as to me."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

JACK BOSSY'S REVELATIONS.

THE commandant advanced quickly toward his visitor, who had appeared at the heels of Dimmick, and the scout hastened to follow him and give all their attention to the scene which had thus begun to develop.

"I am glad to see you again, sheriff," greeted the colonel, as he shook hands with the newcomer.

Then he presented the sheriff, who was a man of formidable proportions, but of kindly eye and mien, to his guests, continuing:

"But, what's up? Something out of the usual run, I have no doubt."

"Quite so, colonel," acknowledged the sheriff, rubbing his hands nervously together and then waving one of them toward a group that was slowly approaching from the direction of the principal entrance. "In a word, I've captured that runaway soldier who fired upon Captain Greyson a couple of weeks since!"

"You have?" rejoined the commandant, his eyes turning quickly upon the approaching party. "I'm glad to hear it—very! That Jack Bossy is a desperate and dangerous fellow, and has long given us no end of trouble. But—what ails him?"

"Oh, I had to shoot him to get him," explained the sheriff. "He fired upon us repeatedly, and would have emptied a couple of revolvers into us if I hadn't been lucky enough to disable him."

The prisoner was brought nearer. He lay upon an army blanket, which was held at the four corners by two of the sheriff's deputies. His face, although tanned by the sun and covered by a short, stubby beard, was strangely pale, as if he had lost nearly all the blood in his veins, and his aspect was unmistakably that of a man near his end.

"Has the doctor seen him?" demanded the commandant, tersely, as the deputies deposited their burden at his feet.

"No, colonel," answered the prisoner, speaking for himself before any one else could. "What's the use?"

He spoke with such difficulty and in such a broken way that only a strong will could have enabled him to speak at all.

"I don't want no doctor," he added. "Jack Bossy knows as well what's the matter as if forty doctors had told him."

He paused, gasping for breath.

"I'm sorry to see you in this fix, Jack," said the commandant, kindly, stooping to wipe the sufferer's frothy lips. "You're badly hurt."

"It was his own fault, colonel," exclaimed Sheriff Watrous. "He wouldn't stop when halted, nor surrender when surrounded."

"That's all true, colonel," confirmed the dying man. "I don't blame the sheriff. But I didn't want to come back here."

"You needn't have felt that way, Jack," assured the commandant. "Haven't I always used you well, and even made more allowance for you than I ought to have done?"

"True, colonel; and that's why I want to tell you something before I die," declared the prisoner, in a voice which seemed to fail with every word. "I didn't want to be brought back here to stand trial for shooting at Cap'n Greyson, for I know how serious that sort of business is, but I'll do you a last good turn, colonel, as an offset for the trouble I've given you. I want to tell you about Budd Finklestone."

The commandant bowed gravely, and the scouts bent nearer, marking the death-stricken hue of the features before them.

"He is very low," said Buffalo Bill, producing a flask from his pocket. "He had better have a drop of brandy."

He suited his action to the word, and the effect was quickly beneficial, the sufferer opening his eyes and rousing himself.

"Thanks," he said, in a feeble voice. "It's all owing to Budd Finklestone that I've reached such an end. I was happy and contented until he began saying to me, as he says to everybody else: 'Why should you be worked to death for thirteen dollars a month? Why should you go out and be killed because of a few red-skins and raiders? Why shouldn't you take things easy? Why not steal when you have a chance, and lie when there's anything to be gained by it? Why shouldn't you shirk all duty as far as shirking is possible? Why not have a good time whenever you can? Why not insist on your rights? Why not ask for better rations and better quarters? Why drill and do guard duty eternally? Why not desert if you can live elsewhere or have any friends to go to? Why be the slave and dupe of those officers or of the Government? Why be a mere tool of the schemes of others? Why not eat, drink, and be merry and do nothing?' Such, colonel, is the sort of language that man is always using, and that's why so many of us have become discontented and dangerous. That's why there has been so much trouble in the fort lately and so many desertions!"

The prisoner collapsed again, panting for breath and closing his eyes.

"I have begun to get track of that fellow, Jack," replied the commandant, "and I am greatly obliged for this information, which I can of course accept as your dying declaration. You comprehend, no doubt, that you are about to leave us?"

"Yes, colonel, I'm going," returned the prisoner, again arousing himself. "But I want to warn you against that man! He's here for a deadly purpose! He's mixed up with all the Indians and outlaws, and has wide connections all up and down the Rockies. He told me he was going to send for Little Elk, who is a particular friend of his, and that he and Little Elk are already agreed between themselves to wipe out this village and fort and everybody in them!"

Sheriff Watrous started, exchanging a surprised look with the commandant, and then said:

"There's something in this, colonel. Little Elk left his reservation ten days ago, and is now encamped, with forty or fifty unruly young bucks, at Cinder Butte, within a dozen or fifteen miles of us."

"Indeed?" ejaculated the colonel, looking as annoyed as astonished. "What excuse does he make for being off his reservation?"

"Oh, one of those eternal old stories of wishing to trade cattle or ponies with another tribe," replied the sheriff, "and when that excuse is played out they'll say they're going to the Crows for a new supply of herbs and roots for medicine. I've sent a messenger to Commissioner Abbott to tell him that he and the old chiefs must look after these young warriors, and am still in hopes that Little Elk will return in peace to the reservation. Meanwhile, you had better throw out pickets, colonel, to make sure that they don't get too near the fort or village unseen."

"That's good advice, colonel," commented Jack Bossy, whose voice had sunk to a mere whisper. "Budd Finklestone has long been stirring up the red-skins on the Navajo and other reservations, and he says he can put hundreds of them on the war-path at any moment!"

The sheriff and Colonel Naylor again exchanged startled glances.

"Can the rascal really have such influence, colonel?" asked the former. "And if so, what is he doing here as a private? How long has he been here?"

"About six months," was the answer.

"Was he alone when he enlisted?"

"No. There was a considerable crowd with him—some ten or a dozen."

"And they came from nowhere in particular?"

"I understood they came off from some railroad to the eastward."

"Where is he now?" pursued the sheriff.

"In the guard-house!"

"Then you've begun to smoke him out?"

"It looks that way, certainly."

"His conduct has always been right?"

"Or, rather, we've only just discovered to the contrary."

"He claimed to be somebody of consequence, didn't he?"

"The son of an English baronet—yes."

"But there's nothing in that claim?"

"Nothing—if I except a mystery, the precise nature of which is not yet apparent."

"He has no right to the name of Finklestone?"

"None whatever. There is a woman here, however, in the village, who claims to be his sister."

"Mrs. Goggin, you mean?"

"Yes, Mrs. Goggin!"

"She really is Budd's sister," assured Jack Bossy, again taking part in the conversation. "At least he told me so—and so did she. She has been in the fort often—but always secretly, with few exceptions. She shares all her brother's secrets—and is as bad as he!"

The feeble, broken voice had now become at times almost inaudible. But the prisoner struggled with his rapidly-failing forces, and continued:

"There is a real Budd Finklestone—but he is a prisoner—in the hands of this deadly impostor! So is Alice King. So is Sarah Gannett and others. They're confined at a place called the 'Quadrangle'—which is so named because it is where the State joins the three Territories south and west. The 'Quadrangle' is the real home of the Ravagers. They live there like princes—on what they steal!"

"Is the place known by any other name, Jack?" asked the commandant.

"No, colonel. For the reason—as they say—that it's not yet large enough—or because they've not yet decided what to call it. They pretend to be honest. They could live there—if not all right with Little Elk and other chiefs. Such a horrible lot as they are! There's a road underground, colonel. I've been there."

The commandant exchanged glances with the scouts, as if a little disturbed by the manifest want of coherency in Jack's declarations, but the good faith and earnestness with which he struggled to finish them was too evident not to find acceptance, as he continued, in a gasping voice:

"He—has often told me, colonel—that he intends to wipe out this fort and village so thoroughly—that not one stone'll be left on another! He and others—including myself, colonel—have been setting secret mines of powder and dynamite—to blow up the fort—and you and all!"

A hoarse rattle in the throat of the speaker interrupted him, and he half-raised himself on one elbow, struggling desperately for breath.

"Beware of him, colonel!" he gasped. "He's the terrible 'King of the Ravagers'! He's 'Whoop-pee' and 'Bad Medicine'! His real name is—"

And the speaker fell back heavily—dead!

CHAPTER XL.

TAKING STERN MEASURES.

FOR nearly a minute Colonel Naylor gazed upon the face of the dead deserter in thoughtful silence.

"What a pity that he didn't speak sooner!" he then ejaculated, with involuntary bitterness. "He might have saved us a great deal of trouble!"

Turning to his new orderly, he resumed:

"There's no one in the infirmary at this moment, I believe, Dimmick?"

"No, colonel."

"Then take this poor fellow there, with the aid of these deputies," ordered the commandant. "Detail a couple of men to prepare him for burial, and a second file to dig a grave for him. You can send a corporal with these details to bury him as soon as everything is ready. In the mean time, I will speak to Chaplain Robertson, who will doubtless wish to offer a prayer at the burial."

Dimmick and the deputies raised the body gently between them, still in its stained blanket, and walked away with it.

"Come back here, orderly," added Colonel Naylor, "as soon as you've given the necessary instructions."

"In about a minute, colonel."

"A very strange batch of revelations, gentlemen," resumed the commandant, turning to the scouts and the sheriff. "What do you think of them, Mr. Cody?"

"I have no doubt of the man's good faith, colonel," replied Buffalo Bill, "and I'm not at all displeased, naturally, to find that the said revelations agree perfectly with what Ben Letts and I were saying to you a short time ago."

"Clearly enough, these facts call for immediate action," said the colonel. "Now that you happen to be here, sheriff, I will send Finklestone before a civil court, and lodge him at Durango for safe-keeping."

"That will be a good move, sir," approved the sheriff, hastily. "He should be detached from all his associates and associations here as soon as possible. The moment he becomes known as 'Whoop-pee' and 'Bad Medicine,' there will be hundreds of complaints lodged against him—enough to imprison him thousands of years, if he could live so long!"

"Of course you are as willing to take charge of him now as later, sheriff?" pursued Colonel Naylor.

"Certainly, the moment you've had him formally committed by competent authority," answered Watrous, "and that need not be a long-winded business, seeing that Mr. Justice Finch resides within a hundred yards of the fort. It will be impossible, however, for me to take charge of the man until late this afternoon, as I'm going westward to hook on to another deserter."

"That will do, of course," said the colonel.

He looked around for Dimmick, who was just returning from his previous errands.

"Run, orderly," he commanded, "and bring Mr. Justice Finch here as soon as you can. Tell him the matter is very important, and that the sheriff and I are waiting for him."

"Yes, colonel," and Dimmick vanished.

"Will you come in, gentlemen?" asked the commandant, turning anew to the scouts and the sheriff, as also to the two deputies who had arrived from the infirmary. "It will be some few minutes before Mr. Finch can be with us."

"Oh, yes, thank you—we'll come in a few minutes, colonel," replied Watrous, as the commandant led the way toward the side-door. "That fellow has given us quite a shake-up."

The worthy official sighed wearily.

"Perhaps a glass of wine will not be at all amiss for you while you're waiting," suggested the colonel.

"Not for us, certainly," admitted the sheriff, following the commandant into the house. "To be candid, we've not yet had our breakfast."

"That's too bad," declared Mrs. Naylor, advancing to shake hands with the sheriff, and then nodding gracefully to the deputies, "but it is a deficiency that can be quickly remedied, as Zellie is still in the kitchen."

As the result of the measures she took, within another minute the sheriff and his aids were promptly engaged in repairing their confessed omission while continuing the conversation with the colonel and the scouts, who had taken seats near them.

"Where did you get Bossy?" at length asked the commandant.

"At a barn near Parrott," replied Watrous. "He had been starved out of the hills—he wanted tobacco—and had come to a chance acquaintance for supplies, but, as usual, his chance acquaintance was ready to betray him for the reward which is always hung over such customers."

The sheriff sighed, and added:

"It's the worst tackle we've had this summer, and the boys and I are really surprised to find that we have come out of the scrimmage uninjured."

At the end of a few minutes, or by the time the sheriff and his aides had done justice to the substantial collation furnished them, Mr. Justice Finch made his appearance, escorted by the orderly.

He was a little old man, with an extremely bald head and meager frame, but he was dis-

tinguished for his uprightness, learning, ability and courage.

His salutations were promptly and pleasantly uttered, Mrs. Naylor and Buffalo Bill coming in for special attention, and then he seated himself at the colonel's desk, in response to the commandant's invitation to that effect, and was put in possession of the facts in the case.

"Why, what an extraordinary state of things!" he could not help saying. "I never heard anything like it!"

"What I wish to do, therefore," concluded Colonel Naylor, "is to send this horrible fraud to Durango for safe-keeping and future trial and punishment, and so leave myself free to give all my attention to the capture of his numerous associates."

"You'll have your hands full, and so will the sheriff," declared the justice, with a grave shake of his head. "But your idea is a good one. I'll set the ball rolling by committing the villain without bail for a hearing."

He set to work.

"You can leave the document with the colonel, Mr. Justice," said Watrous, arising, "and I'll take charge of it, with the prisoner, on my return from the hills."

The justice bowed assent, and the sheriff and his deputies took their departure, Dimmick escorting them to the entrance.

"And now we'll take our snooze, Ben," said Buffalo Bill, to his ally, with a sigh of relief at the turn affairs had taken, "and I must say that for once I feel pretty thoroughly in need of it."

Nodding a temporary adieu to their hosts, they took their way to a handsomely-furnished room over the back parlor which had often been at Ben's disposal, while Colonel Naylor hastened to give his orders for the proposed expedition to the Crater Camp.

CHAPTER XLI.

BEN AND ESTHER.

BUFFALO BILL was almost instantly asleep, but Ben Letts, despite his resolute attempt in the same direction, was not long in discovering that he was engaged in an up-hill business.

In fact, he had ideas of an entirely different order from those essential to slumber.

Uneasy and anxious, with his thoughts turning constantly to the hills in which he had encountered Esther, it was easy for him to reach the conclusion that any further attempt on his part to woo the drowsy god could only result in failure.

The outcome of such a state of affairs can be readily foreseen.

Gaining his feet quietly, he wrote a few lines of explanation to his associate, leaving them where they would be found later.

In another minute he was ready for departure, the removal of his boots, coat, and vest being as far as he had proceeded in the task of undressing.

Slipping down-stairs, he resumed possession of his hat, rifle and overcoat unseen, and left the fort, walking briskly to his own little dwelling.

Much to his relief, he found everything there as he had left it.

A whinny from the rude shed he used as a stable reminded him that he was anxiously awaited in that quarter, and thither he went.

Here was the horse he had used the previous evening, and he hastened to feed it.

But this was not all.

Opening a secret door, a second horse appeared to his gaze, greeting him with a glance that was almost human in its gentle intelligence.

This second horse, of which he had said nothing to any one save Buffalo Bill, and which he had possessed only a week, was a thoroughbred, young and sound, and a beauty.

The price Ben had paid for it was a large one, considering the time and place.

But it was worth all he had paid.

The horse had shown speed and endurance of no common order.

Giving it a small mess of oats, Ben returned to the house and made a somewhat elaborate toilet, which included a shave and a linen shirt, with necktie and collar.

By the time he had taken a final look in a small mirror, his favorite steed had finished its oats and was ready for a drink of water, which Ben gave it.

Then he saddled it and led it out, closing his house and stable, and mounted and rode quietly away.

His course was that he and Buffalo Bill had taken on the previous evening with the Ravagers.

In other terms, he was bound for the region of which Esther Clewson was the princess and priestess.

He was a little less than an hour and a half in reaching the spot where he had taken leave of her, and here he fired his rifle, as she had suggested, then continuing to advance in the supposed direction of the enchantress.

To his great joy, but not much to his surprise—for, man-like, he judged Esther by himself—he soon heard a skurrying of nimble legs and a bounding of agile figures at no great distance

ahead of him, and the three bloodhounds made their appearance, greeting him as an old friend.

"What intelligent, noble creatures!" he exclaimed, with the hearty promptness of a man who is in a mood to see everything *couleur de rose*, as he patted the heads of two of the three which had placed their forepaws on the withers of his horse. "Where's your young mistress? Where is Esther?"

The dogs recognized the name, and looked in the direction from which they had come.

Sure enough, she was not far distant.

Dismounting, Ben advanced to meet her, raising his hat as soon as she appeared to his gaze and bowing profoundly.

In another minute they were together, and it would have been hard to say which of them was the shyest and most joyous.

"What pleasure to find you so readily!" were the words with which Ben began his greetings, as he seized her hand, in a caressing clasp, and raised it to his lips. "Perhaps you are surprised, Esther, to see me again so soon."

"Not particularly, Mr. Letts—"

"Not particularly, Ben, you should say, Esther. I'm Ben to everybody, and very particularly and especially Ben to you!"

"Well, Ben, I was wishing you would come, and I should have passed an uncomfortable day if you had failed to appear."

"Then I am very glad I was not forced to remain away, Esther," said Ben. "Is there anything wrong? You seem worried."

"It's all on account of that prisoner you and Mr. Cody were conveying to the fort," said Esther, facing about quietly, and walking homeward. "Father and Ben are so anxious to know how he came to be in such a fix. We can't even form a rational theory of the mystery. What can a general have done to be treated in that terrible manner, bound and gagged?"

"You shall hear in due course, Esther," returned Ben. "But first, if you are entirely willing, tell me how you came to be acquainted with him."

"The dogs guided him to our cottage one afternoon about two months ago, and he had a little chat with father and Ben, while he ate a piece of pie and drank a glass of milk. Naturally enough, he gave some account of himself, saying that he was a general in the army, and had been sent here secretly from Washington to hunt up sundry outlaws who had become troublesome. Since then Ben has heard about the Ravagers, but he kept the information to himself until this morning for fear of worrying father and me, but we now suppose the outlaws referred to by the general must be the Ravagers."

Walking beside Esther, Ben ventured to take her arm gently in his own, with that bold sort of deference, or innocent sort of boldness, which is rarely considered offensive by its object.

"And since that day?" he queried.

"Well, he has been here four times since that first occasion, explaining that business brought him near us, and that he could not refrain from paying his respects. I did not see him the last two times he was here, for the reason that I did not like either his looks or his actions. Right or wrong, I felt that I was in some way the object of his intrusions, for such they were, as none of us ever invited him to call upon us."

"And this is the sum total of your dealings with him, Esther?"

"Yes, Ben."

"I'm not only glad of that, Esther, but I must congratulate you upon the fact. Some subtle influence must have caused you to flee his presence. That man— But how near are we to your cottage?"

"Oh, within a few hundred yards. Why do you ask?"

"Because I shall be better pleased to finish what I was about to say after we have joined your father or brother."

The girl uttered a pleased little cry.

"Those dogs are returning, you see, Ben," she said. "They've been for my brother, and are bringing him to us. Here he comes."

CHAPTER XLII.

THE TWO BENS.

THE meeting of the two young men was most cordial and pleasant.

"So, this is my namesake?" greeted Ben Clewson, shaking hands warmly, as he smiled a welcome. "I have been curious to see you, from the moment my sister returned in such a flutter from the little service she rendered you as guide."

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Clewson," returned Ben, in that hearty tone, and with that pleased, earnest mien which is better than all the elaborate phrases in the world, "and the more so because I bring you good news."

He led the way to the trunk of a fallen tree near at hand, and motioned the brother and sister to sit down near him, which they did.

It almost seemed to him as if he were looking into a mirror, so much did Ben Clewson resemble him, being just about his age and build, with the same sort of hair, eyes and features.

"News?" repeated Ben Clewson. "That's about the last thing we would look for."

"Nevertheless, I bring you news that will surprise you. I've had a talk with Purkitt."

A cry of mad-dog could not have startled the brother and sister more than did the utterance of that name.

They stared in questioning horror.

"Yes, Buffalo Bill and I encountered him at daylight," pursued Ben, with a smile between merriment and contempt. "He was 'armed to the teeth,' as the novelists say, and was accompanied by two deputies named Hayter, who had the 'guy'ner's requisition' for both you and your father. But I sent them to the right-about, as you shall now hear."

He proceeded to detail his interview with the rural dude from Kentucky, with many a smile and laugh, and gradually the hunted look faded from the features of his hearers.

"And so they've gone back?" asked Ben Clewson, in his wonted voice.

"Yes, never to return," replied Ben Letts.

Esther's little hand stole into the narrator's at this juncture, and nestled there confidently, while her starry eyes looked gratefully at him through a mist of tears.

"It's well for him," declared the brother, "and I cannot deny that it is also well for us, and especially for Esther. He has been the terror of her life for two years, and it was on account of his persecutions that we came to Colorado. With the warm gratitude of my sister, as she has already expressed it, in her own way, Mr. Letts, please accept mine, and the assurance that my father's also will be forthcoming at the first opportunity."

Ben raised his hand with a quick, deprecating gesture.

"I don't deserve any thanks," he said. "I saw at a glance what a villain Purkitt is, and could do no less than send him about his business."

"What joy to be rid of that incubus!" exclaimed Esther, with a glad, bright uplifting of her head, as if shaking off the last vestige of Hamilton Purkitt's blighting influence. "How good of you, Ben, to see things as they are so quickly!"

"Ho, ho!" exclaimed the brother, with a smile as delicate as a woman's. "We're getting on, it seems! Two Bens in the family already!"

"Yes, two brothers!" cried Esther, taking the hand of Ben Clewson, fondly, she having placed herself next to Ben Letts. "How suddenly our great shadow has lifted! And what sunshine has come! Surely there is a Great Hand in human affairs, which manifests itself at the right time and in the right way!"

"Let us never doubt it, sister," said the brother, with solemn tenderness, dropping a kiss upon Esther's fair hand. "What better and brighter change could have possibly come into our lives than that brought by this other Ben!"

He arose in pleasant agitation and began walking to and fro in front of the young couple, with many a glad and admiring glance of affection at his sister and of gratitude at Ben Letts, while he resumed:

"It's only candor and justice to say, Mr. Letts, that there is nothing wrong or wicked about us. Father did indeed shoot Purkitt, but under such circumstances that any right-minded man must approve of the act."

"Colonel Naylor mentioned—probably upon some chatter of the Hayters—that your father is a moonshiner," said Ben, frankly. "What truth is there in that?"

"Not any, Mr. Letts," was the brother's reply. "Father has indeed talked moonshine and whisky, but merely with the idea of offering an excuse for our stay in this wilderness and to conceal the fact that we were really hiding from the Hayters and Purkitt."

"Quite natural, quite right," commented Ben Letts.

"As to what else there is to be said about us," pursued young Clewson, "the record would hardly fill a thimble. Like so many others hereabouts, we have squatted upon a piece of land which has not been surveyed, and of course we shall till the same another year and raise all we want. Meanwhile, we have a cow and a few chickens, not to speak of three good horses. We've built a fairly good house in an out-of-the-way place, and have stores enough in it to carry us till spring, or the money to procure them, so that we are in a fair way to live comfortably, even without the game which enters so largely into a border bill of fare."

"All of which is very pleasant, I must say," commented Ben, with a smile which was at once a caress to Esther and a congratulation to her brother. "There's only one drawback to your situation, as I see."

"And that, Ben?" queried Esther.

"The fact that 'Whoop-pee' and 'Bad Medicine' has smuggled himself into your rustic Eden under the vague title of 'General!'"

Now his hearers stared at him, literally gasping for breath.

"What can you mean?" asked the brother.

"Just what I tell you, Mr. Clewson. The man Buffalo Bill and I captured last night, and who is known to you as 'the general,' is really the Chief of the Ravagers."

The expressions of wondering terror which succeeded can be readily imagined.

"But, happily," resumed Ben, "we now have the miscreant safely 'hived' at Fort Harris, and there is little likelihood that he will ever intrude upon you again. His headquarters, as I've just learned, are at the 'Quadrangle' a little hamlet at the point where Colorado joins Utah, New Mexico and Arizona."

"Is it possible?" cried the brother, excitedly. "What! you've been there?" asked Ben, with corresponding surprise.

"Yes. Not knowing what minute Purkitt would arrive here," explained young Clewson, "father and I have been looking for another retreat, and have explored the whole country between here and the point you name. We were even tempted to remove to the hamlet in question, but were discouraged by the inhabitants."

"And can you guide me there, Mr. Clewson?" asked Ben Letts, excitedly, as he relinquished the hand of Esther with an earnest caress and sprang to his feet.

"In a bee-line, Mr. Letts, or as near as may be."

"Is your horse good for the journey?"

"Perfectly, although, as we have three, we'll both lead one, naturally."

"Then I'll pay my respects to your father, and we'll be off. Come!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS HAMLET.

ALL was now excitement, even the hounds springing up to lead the way to the cottage, after having sat quietly on their haunches around Ben's horse, with an air as grave and quiet as if they had been listening to the conversation.

The two Bens and Esther were soon met by Mr. Clewson, who received his new acquaintance with marked cordiality, leading the way into a neat, roomy cottage, which stood in a dell at the base of a rocky cliff, with a spring beside it, and stately pines all around.

"Oh, father! such news as Mr. Letts has brought us!" cried Esther, rushing up to her father and embracing him.

"Good news, evidently," returned Mr. Clewson, with an admiring smile.

"The best news possible, father!" cried Esther, as all sat down. "Ben will tell you!"

Young Clewson hastened to do so, quite as much to the joy and relief of his father as to Esther's and his own.

Then was made known the identity of "the general," and the proposed visit of the two Bens to the "Quadrangle."

Of course the father approved warmly, very much pleased that it seemed possible for his son to be of some use to his namesake.

A few minutes were passed pleasantly, while preparations were being made for the journey, and then the two Bens rode away at an easy pace, each leading an extra horse, so as to divide their coming fatigues and make rapid progress.

Ben Letts was glad to find that his companion was an *alter ego* in a warlike sense, as well as in looks, for he carried a rifle and revolver of the best make, and was evidently at home with them.

The three dogs had been left behind for many reasons, and notably because the journey was likely to be too long and rapid for them.

"It all seems like a dream, Mr. Letts," was the first remark of young Clewson, as the couple reached a crest from which they had a last view of the cottage.

"All good things generally do," was Ben's reply, "but I hope this proposed suppression of 'Whoop-pee' will prove a permanent reality. You refer, of course, to Purkitt's retreat and to the masquerade of the Ravager as 'The General!'"

"Exactly, and also to the strange manner in which you met Purkitt and got rid of him. But I see by several of your remarks that I am not yet half-posted about the career of that man. Suppose you tell me, as we ride quietly toward his retreat, all you know of his history?"

"With pleasure."

We need not pause upon the conversation of the travelers, nor upon the incidents of their journey, which were neither many nor exciting.

The dark, windy day was rather favorable than otherwise to their movements, and good time was realized, so that by the middle of the afternoon they found themselves approaching their destination.

"What's that, Clew?" suddenly asked Ben, his new friend having requested him to address him by that name for the sake of convenience, as his chums had done at school and college. "That moving figure, I mean, in the bushes on that crest ahead of us?"

Clew whipped out a glass with which he had provided himself, and took a look at the object in question.

"That's the most hideous little dwarf that ever existed," he then replied, restoring his glass to his pocket. "He has been watching us and is running to carry the news of our approach, without bearing in mind sufficiently how much the late frosts have denuded the trees

and bushes of their leaves. You should see him close to, as I have on one occasion. He's hideousness and wickedness incarnate. He's evidently employed by somebody interested to take note of all persons who are seen approaching."

"Then he may have seen me, when I was here before," said Ben, "and in that case I may be recognized as an enemy."

"You've been here before, then?"

"Yes, once, from the westward, coming and going in the dark, so that I gained no particular idea of the topography of the country hereabouts, the more especially as we looked to our Injun scouts for guidance. Our route to-day is mostly new to me, so that I should have been quite unable to come here with anything like your directions. But where is that dwarf now, Clew?"

"Oh, we shall see no more of him. He'll take some short cut across the ravine we are compelled to go around, and will arrive at least a quarter of an hour ahead of us. We shall hardly see him again."

He reflected a few moments, and added:

"From that crest we could get a sort of bird's-eye view of the 'Quadrangle,' but we should also give the enemy a glimpse of ourselves, besides losing time. We'd better push right into the settlement. I presume you have some plan of action?"

"In a general way—yes, Clew. But as it must necessarily be modified by circumstances, I'll wait to discuss its features as occasions arise."

The couple were now on a trail which had been so frequently used that it was fully entitled to be called a road, although neither fence nor field was visible.

"I have been looking for a glimpse of a house for the last ten minutes," announced Ben.

"We shall not see one till we have crossed the ravine ahead of us," returned Clew, "for the reason that the ridge on the other side is heavily wooded, as you see, and the sight of the hamlet slopes away from us."

"We ought at least to see the smoke of some chimney!"

"Perhaps so, but it's not exactly an hour for meals, and it's even possible that people of this sort never light a fire in the daytime."

Continuing to advance, the couple crossed the ravine which had been mentioned, and began ascending a slope which led to the ridge marking their destination.

A few minutes later, on reaching the crest of the ridge in question and getting clear of some trees and bushes inclosing the road, the travelers came suddenly upon a hamlet of about twenty houses.

These buildings presented a wide variety, some of them being mere huts, others substantial log-cabins, and still others handsome frame dwellings.

They were clustered at the intersection of two roads which crossed each other almost at right angles, making a cross-roads very nearly in the form of an ordinary letter X.

At least two of them were so large as to suggest a tavern.

The configuration of the vicinity was such that the travelers could look down upon the entire hamlet at a glance, and any one doing so could hardly fail to notice its X-like character.

Singularly enough, as the travelers halted a moment to take in the features of the scene, not a sign of life was visible; not a human being of any age or color; neither horse nor cow; not even a dog or a cat.

"Evidently nobody's at home," remarked Ben Letts, smiling sarcastically, as he resumed progress. "But they'll none the less have to take note of our arrival."

And with this he led the way toward the nearest house, where he dismounted and advanced to the door, knocking loudly upon it.

CHAPTER XLIV.

AN INTERESTING MOTHER.

THE door was soon drawn ajar by a faded young woman, in an easy-wrapper, who peered out very suspiciously at the visitor.

"I want to see the captain's representative in this place," announced Ben Letts, with his most careless and unconcerned air.

The young woman stared at him still harder.

"I don't know what you mean, sir," she declared. "What captain? What representative? I don't know anything about them. You'll have to excuse me, sir."

She closed the door in his face.

"Well, that's 'short and sweet,' Clew," said Ben to his associate, as he passed him on his way to the next door. "I'll try again."

The next house was close at hand, and in another instant Ben was again knocking for admittance.

There was some delay about the response, but at length the door was opened a couple of inches, and a little old man with one eye and one arm looked out inquiringly.

"I fear I've mistaken the house, sir," said Ben, smiling and bowing, "but I wish to find some one here who has authority to act for the captain."

"Who sent you?" came in a crisp, snarling voice.

"The captain."

"Have you a letter to anybody here?"

"No—"

Slam! and the young investigator again found himself alone.

"Well, we are at least learning that the place is not as deserted as it looks," said Ben, as he struck out briskly for the third house. "Don't be discouraged."

The third door soon received his attentions, and it was opened on the instant, as if the occupant of the house had been attentive to the unwonted arrival.

This occupant was a very old woman, and close behind her stood a young girl of a dozen years.

"I want to find the captain's sister, Mrs. Goggin," said Ben, bowing politely. "In which of these houses does she live?"

The old woman stared at her questioner long enough to easily count twenty, and then shook her head slowly.

"Mrs. Goggin?" she repeated. "The captain? I never heard of them. I don't know who you mean, sir."

She gave a slight jerky nod of dismissal, closing the door.

Crossing the street to a fourth door, Ben again knocked loudly.

A somewhat marked delay followed, but at last a voice called from within:

"Who's there?"

"A messenger from the captain," replied Ben through the keyhole.

A grunt of disgust was heard, succeeded by retreating footsteps.

Ben knocked again, but no further tangible notice was bestowed upon him, and he returned to Clew with an air of disappointment.

"This 'captain' business don't work," he said, in a guarded tone. "I shall have to try new tactics. But we'll get there in time, Clew."

Selecting the best house in the place, as near as he could judge by a hasty and incomplete survey of the exterior from where he stood, Ben hastened to announce himself at the front entrance.

The door was opened promptly and widely by a large, portly, grim-faced woman rather past the prime of life, and at the same instant out came a burst of noisy laughter, from some ill-defined quarter and direction, but evidently the merriment of a party of men over some game, play, or droll story.

But how hollow and far away the sound!

It seemed to come from the bowels of the earth!

"Ah, good-afternoon, madam," cried Ben, with his politest bow and most insinuating air. "I'm glad to have found you at last, after trying several doors. I come from Dorus and Dollie."

It was the first time Ben had pronounced these names to any one save Buffalo Bill and Clew, since they came to his hearing, and he had reserved them for his last, desperate play.

Not in vain, as it proved!

The effect was instantaneous!

"Come in! come in, sir!" cried the old woman, with a start and a flush.

Scarcely waiting to close the door after Ben had stepped into the hall, she added:

"They are well, I hope?"

"Oh, yes—as usual!"

"This way, please."

She led the way into a handsomely furnished room—which was lighted only from an inner court, however—and motioned him to an easy-chair, resuming:

"You have a letter, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes," replied Ben, in the same careless tone as before, as he began feeling in his pockets. "I put it away very carefully, as there is a nice present from Dollie with it, but I'll soon find it."

"Are those your horses?" asked the woman.

"And is that man with them your friend?"

"Exactly—"

"Then I'll send them around to the stable, and ask your friend to come in," she said.

She touched a bell as she spoke, and a door opened, giving admittance to the horrible little dwarf Ben had seen half an hour earlier, and who glared at him now like a tiger.

Leading the way through the hall to the door, which she opened again, the woman beckoned to Clew, at the same time giving her orders to the dwarf, and the next instant Clew came into the house, while the dwarf gathered the reins of the four horses into one hand and started around the corner with them.

"Walk in, sir," invited the woman, waving a jeweled hand, and following Clew into Ben's presence. "Please be seated."

Clew accepted the invitation, but without unslipping his rifle, as he saw that his leader had made no move in that direction, while the strange hostess planted herself in an easy attitude near Ben, and contemplated his proceedings with eagerness and anxiety, as he searched and searched for the letter whose existence he had invented.

"Strange where that letter can be!" he muttered, as a flood of perspiration began to bead his forehead, while he thrust his hands into his pockets with desperate energy. "Did I give it to you, pard?"

"Perhaps you did," answered Clew, arising and beginning to search, comprehending that this suggestion might be preliminary to something else.

"My daughter is well, you said?" questioned the woman, with the air of being moved by her excitement to say something.

"Quite so," replied Ben, looking more closely at her, and noticing now a marked resemblance to both Finklestone and Mrs. Goggin. "Ah, perhaps it is here!"

He drew out a package of several letters, and began running them over.

"Here's yours, to begin with," he said, with his most insinuating air, as he handed the woman the letter the colonel had found in the house of Mrs. Goggin. "The fact that Dollie gives me such a message to keep will at least assure you, my dear madam, that I am no impostor. Dollie and Dorus both regret exceedingly that they have not yet been able to make any suitable response to this epistle, but they desired me to say that they will both be here without fail in the course of the evening. Where can that letter be?"

"Oh, never mind it now, sir," said the woman, with a very gracious air, handing back the letter, upon which she had bestowed a single glance of recognition. "As you suggest, you must be all right, or my last letter to my daughter would not be in your possession. The one you seek may be in your saddle-bags!"

Ben struck an air of relief, looking as if the suggestion were an inspiration.

"That's it, sure enough!" he cried. "I'll go and get it."

He made a move toward the door.

"Never mind it just now," said the woman, a smile intended to be pleasant appearing upon her countenance for the first time since the arrival of her visitors. "We'll go to the stable together to fetch it later. Remove your arms and your overcoats, gentlemen, and take possession here, making yourselves as comfortable as possible. I'm about to have my afternoon tea served here, and shall be glad if you will join me. Excuse me just a moment while I give the necessary orders."

She bowed herself out with ponderous grace, going toward the rear of the dwelling.

Then the daring intruders exchanged glances, Ben's being one of triumph, and Clew's an inquiry.

"All I know distinctly," then said Ben, in answer to that mute appeal, "is that she's the mother of Finklestone and Mrs. Goggin! Evidently, too, we're in the head shanty of the whole gang! Listen!"

The burst of noisy laughter he had heard on entering the house again resounded on his hearing from some point far, far below!

CHAPTER XLV.

IN A STRANGE HOUSEHOLD!

CLEW held his breath as he listened.

"What can that be?" he asked.

"It's evidently a guard of Ravagers who are playing cards, or otherwise amusing themselves."

"Where are they?"

"In some underground place—perhaps an old mine, or mining excavation. This house seems to be built exactly over the spot and to be the entrance to it."

Another burst of laughter succeeded.

"We will of course look in upon them," said Ben, "as soon as we've made things fast here. Jack Bossy spoke of an underground place, in which are confined Alice King, Sarah Gannett, and others, including the real Budd Finklestone, and from these facts you'll see what sort of an investigation is before us!"

"Shall we *peel*, as the old woman suggested?" asked Clew.

"Yes, but leave your iron handy!"

He set the example, laying his overcoat across the back of a chair, and standing his rifle in a corner, in such a way that it was masked by the garment.

Clew did likewise, and then they loosened their revolvers, Ben's in his left breast-pocket and Clew's on his right hip.

"Of course you'll act, Clew, when I give you the word," pursued Ben, as they resumed their seats. "Our situation is critical. There are Ravagers all around us, male and female, particularly the latter. There may be a dozen of those guards, or keepers. It's likely, however, that most of the men here are suitable subjects for the retired list. The man I saw at one of those other doors was a one-eyed cripple. That fiendish little dwarf, too—"

A door opened softly, and the "fiendish little dwarf" made his appearance. It was the door by which the woman had retreated, and she followed the dwarf.

She still smiled, but in a rather feeble and fluttering way, as if she had found cause for uneasiness in the situation.

As to the dwarf, he had somewhat changed his appearance for the better since the arrival of the visitors, putting on a well-turned school-boy collar, with a blue waistcoat and handkerchief, and inserting in his ears small circular rings which had doubtless been the property of some lady.

He had also tucked a revolver in his belt and buckled on a saber nearly as long as himself.

But what a hideous little caricature of humanity he was!

Scarcely four feet in height, he looked still shorter by reason of the unsightly hump on his back and that shortening of the body which is inseparable from that species of deformity, while his arms and legs, lank, crooked and ungainly, seemed to be out of all proportion to his body, as is the case with the limbs of various species of spiders.

The visitors arose at the entrance of the couple and inclined themselves with a smiling ease that very few men could have attained under such circumstances.

"Here comes my afternoon lunch, gentlemen," said the woman, holding the door open to admit a long-leaved table which was borne by a couple of female Mexican servants, who would have been called peonas in their own country. "I have added a substantial dish or two in consideration of your long ride, but we'll have a good dinner later. I serve it here on your account, too, instead of in the dining-room, as we wish to be quite by ourselves, of course, in order to talk freely, my servants speaking English."

Even while these few words were being uttered, the peonas had raised the leaves of the table and placed four covers, and they now retired in silence.

During this interval the dwarf had taken two or three turns in the room with a stalking theatrical step, as if trying to give himself the dignity of his saber, but he strode promptly to the side of the woman the moment the door had closed upon the servants.

This act, like all his actions, and even like his accouterments, made a marked impression on the visitors. He looked and moved, in fact, as if he were at home, and master of his household.

"The present moment, madam," said Ben Letts, as the visitors again inclined themselves, "is a good one for a brief mention as to who we are. My friend is Ben Clewson, and I am Ben Letts. We have not yet formally joined the brotherhood, but we are in a fair way to do so, as I have been paying attention to Dollie, and have found favor in her sight."

"One word only, Mr. Letts," said the dwarf, in a harsh, discordant voice. "You have been in the cavalry?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have been here before?"

"In this beautiful hamlet—yes."

"You came here with Colonel Nayler, on one of his scouts?"

"Ah, you recognize me? Good! Yes, I was here. Like Josh Keeder, Sam Gaddley, and so many of your best friends, I've had my day among the troopers, but I hope that fact will not be at all to my disadvantage in the new rôle I've undertaken."

He again inclined himself, and the woman smiled unreservedly upon him.

"Certainly not," she said.

"Certainly not," repeated the dwarf, as a modification for the better became apparent in the grim, suspicious outlines of his hideous countenance. "We recruit our friends, of course, wherever we can. You seem a model of frankness, young man, as Mrs. Wrexton was saying!"

"And that reminds me," said the woman, with a flourish of her jeweled hand that was meant to be graceful. "I must tell you who we are, as an acknowledgment of your politeness. I am Mrs. Wrexton," and she inclined herself, "and this gentleman," she indicated the dwarf by a second flourish, "is Mr. Wrexton, my husband!"

The dwarf acknowledged the introduction by a bow and an inclination.

"And now to table," he invited, with the air of a man in his own house, as he waved an ungainly hand and arm toward the waiting repast.

CHAPTER XLVI.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT!

IN the mean time, events had been tending at Fort Harris to grave complications.

The new day had proved to be a repetition of its predecessor, but gradually grew to exhibit such an increase of cloud, wind, and gloom, as to suggest that nature was gathering her forces for some tremendous struggle.

Colonel Nayler returned in due course from his expedition to the Crater Camp, but reported that he had seen nothing of Mrs. Goggin and the Ravagers, and had been obliged to content himself with burning their buildings and the firewood they had accumulated to warm them.

Dutt Smiley and his three associates recovered in the course of the morning from the effect of the drugged whisky in which they had indulged at the house of Ben Letts, but they remained under close guard in the casemate to which Colonel Nayler had consigned them.

It was wholly in vain that he consumed an hour in plying them with threats and promises, with a view to at least one confession, but they all defied him.

Buffalo Bill did not appear upon the scene

again until late in the afternoon, and then the colonel and Mrs. Naylor were surprised to see him alone.

"Ben has gone away," he announced, in answer to their eager questions. "In fact, he left this morning, with a few words of explanation to the effect that he couldn't sleep, and might as well visit the charming daughter of the wilderness of whom I was telling you, colonel."

"But when is he coming back, Mr. Cody?" "He doesn't undertake to say, colonel. Here is his note, and all I can make out of it is what I've stated."

That, indeed, was all that could be made of it.

"But may he not get into some danger in that neighborhood?" asked the colonel, as he handed back Ben's note.

"Hardly, but I'm not without a fear that he'll strike out for the 'Quadrangle.' He's capable of that or any other rashness. How about Sheriff Watrous and his prisoner?"

"The sheriff has not yet appeared," replied Colonel Naylor, "but he may be looked for at any moment, if his plans have been carried out according to his intentions. We've all had dinner, of course, but we've kept yours ready. Come to the dining-room."

Buffalo Bill hesitated barely long enough for his hesitation to be perceptible.

"I would wait for Ben, and even for Sheriff Watrous, if there was any certainty as to the moment of their coming," he then said. "As the case stands, I may as well have my dinner, and have it out of the way."

The colonel and Mrs. Naylor remained in the dining room with him while he ate dinner, and even Zellie came in two or three times, with fresh supplies of warm food, exhibiting a keen desire to make the distinguished guest as comfortable as possible.

A visit to the secret tunnel under the guard-house succeeded the dinner, and Buffalo Bill could not help wondering that such a work could have been executed without the knowledge of the colonel or any of his officers.

"It shows how well the rascals are organized," he declared, after a discussion of the various facts in the case, "and gives us a pretty strong hint to remain on our guard or we may again be caught napping."

Returning to the side veranda, the colonel and his guest waited in vain for the arrival of Ben Letts and the sheriff until night again made its appearance.

But there was nothing anxious in this waiting.

"Ben knows that everything is all right here," said the colonel, in response to an expression of solicitude from Mrs. Naylor, "and it's perfectly natural that he should take a little time to cultivate the acquaintance of the enchantress he seems to have encountered in the mountains."

Buffalo Bill nodded and smiled his approval of this opinion, with which he agreed cordially.

"But what about those secret mines, colonel?" he demanded. "Have you found them?"

"Not the least trace of them, Mr. Cody, although three or four of us have been giving constant attention to the matter since my return from the Crater. Can it be that Jack was mistaken on that head?"

"I don't think so, colonel. They probably exist. But they'll hardly be fired," with a smile, "so long as we keep a few Ravagers in irons in the guard-house and casemates!"

"True, Mr. Cody, and the suggestion shall not be forgotten," said Colonel Naylor. "As soon as 'Dorus' is gone, I'll people that guard-house with Dutt Smiley and his party, while waiting to collect a new batch of the enemy. Ah! here comes Watrous at last," he added, springing up briskly. "Let him have dinner promptly, Neerie, as he still has a long ride before him."

Three men had indeed driven into the fort, with the team of the sheriff, which had been there often enough to be recognized at a glance, one of the horses being marked almost as strongly as a zebra.

It was the view of this team, rather than of the three men, which had called to the colonel's lips the exclamation we have recorded, for the men were so muffled that very little of their faces was visible.

The last of the principal figure, like the outlines of the figure itself, seemed to belong to the sheriff, but a hat more or less, even in the feeble light shed upon the scene, was not likely to be taken by Buffalo Bill for the man himself.

With a start, he looked closer.

"This is not the sheriff, colonel!" he whispered.

"Not! It's certainly the sheriff's team. That is his spotted horse."

"But they're backing! Let's go to them!" They hastened to do so.

Here they could reach the wagon, however, the driver had taken a half turn, thus bringing his face and that of his companions into the shadow, and placing the vehicle in readiness for departure.

"Here we are, colonel," said the driver, in a low, hoarse, but distinct tone, which was so nearly like the sheriff's that it would have passed for his with any one who was not on the watch

for a trick. "Bring out your man. The more quiet you are about it the better, so that the enemy'll not detect what we are doing."

Buffalo Bill pinched the colonel's arm, and both realized the situation.

These men were not the sheriff and his deputies, although they were in possession of the sheriff's team!

They were Ravagers!

And the only conclusion to be naturally drawn from these premises was that they were there to get Finklestone into their hands and so compass his escape!

But where was the sheriff?

The question was instantly, strangely and terribly answered!

CHAPTER XLVII.

BAD FOR FINKLESTONE.

EVEN as Buffalo Bill and Colonel Naylor asked themselves that question, three men came hurriedly into the little gate at the entrance, rifle in hand, and advanced a few yards into a desirable position, taking the drop on the three impostors in the sheriff's wagon.

These new-comers were the real sheriff and his deputies.

They looked almost as disguised as their predecessors, so thoroughly were they handaged and bundled, as the heroes of a hard-fought battle, but they were none the less authentic—none the less dangerous!

At sight of them, Colonel Naylor could not repress a loud exclamation of joy.

The three men in the wagon turned quickly, as was natural, to see what so moved him.

Grand tableau!

"There's your answer," cried the commandant to the three frauds, with a wave of the hand toward the sheriff. "And if you don't find it sufficient," he added, with a gesture to his guest—"why, just look here!"

One look was enough!

Colonel Naylor and Buffalo Bill had them covered—the latter with a revolver in each hand, as was his wont in certain situations.

"That'll do, colonel," cried the driver, throwing down the reins. "We've lost the game, and can only surrender at discretion!"

"Then step down here, one at a time, beginning with you!"

The man proceeded to comply.

"Corporal of the guard," cried the colonel. The call was answered in about six seconds by "Fourth Corporal Brottle," who had been drugged by Mrs. Goggin, as related in a former chapter.

He had been promoted several grades upon the recommendation of Buffalo Bill, who had heard something to his credit, it will be remembered, on the occasion of the famous ride to the Crater.

Due orders were given, and the three impostors were investigated and ironed.

They turned out to be Sam Gaddley, Hank Tilkins, and Dan Ringwood.

Seeing them being cared for, Watrous and his men slung their rifles on their arms and hastened to come forward.

"How welcome you are, sheriff," cried the commandant, offering his hand to Watrous and nodding to the two deputies. "It's unnecessary to say. You've been in a tight place."

"Well, I should smile," answered the sheriff excitedly, taking the colonel by the arm and conducting him beyond the hearing of any one else. "A dozen of these chaps met us on the Parrott road, and took us in after some severe popping and tussling, as you can see by the way we're battered. We were bound, chained, ironed and anchored till we had no more show for escape than a fly corked in a bottle!"

"Then how are you here?"

"We were set free by a Ravager who has turned traitor—by Ted Grapple!"

"Ah, I'd like to see him! He's one of the four who carried off my wife. But why has he turned traitor?"

"In one word—jealousy! If a second is needed—revenge! It seems the fellow went sweet on Mrs. Goggin some time ago. Now, discovering that there's no chance for him, he has gone sour. It's one of the funniest situations you ever saw! That woman has engaged herself to no less than seven Ravagers, and the victims have at length got together and compared notes! Oh, such a buzzing! Some of 'em'll be here soon to unload what they know. Meantime, Ted Grapple has been the first to act, or give a practical turn to his wrath, and here we are!"

"Bravo!" cried the colonel, in delight. "It's bad to mix love and war, and I'm not sorry to see our enemies reaping their natural harvest. But who is the accepted man of the crowd, if there is any?"

"Oh, this chap here—Dan Ringwood! Mrs. Goggin has agreed to marry him as soon as her brother is released, and the condition of his acceptance was that he should join Sam and Hank in this effort!"

The colonel made a gesture to Brottle.

"Get these three into the wagon," he ordered. Brottle complied, with the aid of the men he had called to his assistance, while the sheriff gave fuller explanations.

"And now, Brottle," resumed the colonel, "slip out and find Mr. Justice Finch and bring him to me. Tell him very important."

The corporal vanished.

"Your idea is, colonel, to send these three to Durango for trial?" queried Watrous.

"Exactly, for carrying off my wife. To this end, we shall need commitments, and Mr. Finch will require some few minutes to prepare them. This will afford you a chance to have dinner."

"Good!" cried Watrous. "We haven't had a morsel since we left here this morning."

Leaving the wagon under guard, the colonel led the way into the house, and scarcely spoke again until he had examined the wounds of his guests, given them a chance to wash and renovate their toilets, and conducted them to the table.

The next event was the arrival of Mr. Finch, who was pleasantly excited with the facts Brottle had given him.

"Our ball is rolling on, it seems, colonel," he cried. "The more you give me of this sort of work the better. Go on with your dinner, sheriff. I'll be ready as soon as you are."

He proceeded to the commandant's desk and commenced operations.

"Shall you want an escort, sheriff?" asked the colonel.

"What! with three of us to guard them!" exclaimed Watrous. "We'd be ashamed!"

His deputies approved of this answer.

"But Finklestone is such a dangerous customer!" insisted the colonel. "Then, too, the roads are full of Ravagers, as you have seen for yourself. Mr. Cody was waylaid by a dozen of them at the forks on his way here!"

"Oh, well," said the sheriff, "I'm ready for a compromise. You may provide a stout chain and padlock for each prisoner, in addition to his irons and handcuffs, and chain him to the wagon!"

"It shall be done, sir," returned the commandant, motioning Diannick to accompany him and moving toward the door. "But I must also insist on an escort. You must take at least the four men who are now guarding the prisoners in the guard-house. We can't be too sure of getting these men to Durango."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

ANOTHER TRAITOROUS GUARD.

WITH what emotions the four prisoners in the guard-house—Budd, Hillyer, Stubby Jobson and Dick Rasker—had taken such note of the preceding events and proceedings as their situation permitted, can be briefly stated.

Like many other sheriffs in the vicinity of our Western forts, where desertions had become so frequent as to receive especial consideration in the current reports of the Secretary of War, Watrous had captured great numbers of these fugitives, and hence had become one of the best-hated men in the county.

With what scowls the four prisoners had glared at him, therefore, as he came into the fort, will be divined from these premises:

"Look at him, boys!" cried Finklestone. "He comes just in time to knock our proposed rescue in the head! He's as hard on us as he was on poor Jack Bossy! Yes—see! Sam and the rest surrender! Bad—bad! Oh, that cursed sheriff! There's a man I'd like to chew and spit out! I hate him even worse, if such a thing is possible, than I hate that meddling Buffalo Bill!"

"And who don't?" queried Stubby Jobson, with savage malignancy. "But we look like chawing him, don't we, with those three now added to us?"

He waved his hand in awful and despairing bitterness, his chains rattling.

"True, Stubby, things are in a bad state," admitted Budd, as he glanced at the wild eyes and desperate faces of his fellow-prisoners, "but they might be worse! Just think of it! Our guards are our own mind again, despite all the old man's care to the contrary!"

It was true!

Another group of traitorous guards had been placed over the prisoners.

They were tall, stalwart men, four in number.

They had never figured as Ravagers, but two of them had been endeavoring to woo Mrs. Goggin, and the brother and sister had not experienced much difficulty in winning them over to their cause, in this dark and desperate hour.

An offer of five hundred dollars to each man, half cash, and the balance in the morning, had removed any scruples they may have had in the premises, and had made them anxious for the completion of the business.

"Then, too," resumed Budd, after a brilliant glance at his guards, all of whom had been posted just without the entrance of the guard-house, so that the colonel could see them at any moment from his back window, "it's no small point in our favor that my sister has been able to smuggle hers in into the fort unseen, bringing me a full report of the situation of affairs outside."

Mrs. Goggin was indeed present, seated near her brother, with a face which had its shadows, but which was none the less a mirror of energy and hope.

She was still in the disguise of a soldier, and

had been hovering near the fort all day with Josh Reeder and the rest of the Ravagers the scouts had left with her at the Crater camp.

The allies of the pair had been in and out of the fort repeatedly during the day, bringing and carrying information and orders.

As to the danger of Mrs. Goggin's situation, it had been reduced to a minimum.

Not only were all the prisoners and their guards on the lookout to see that no one approached unseen, but she had established her route so well across one of the walls that she only needed to secure a start of a few seconds to be able to vanish.

"The tunnel, to be sure, has been discovered and filled up," continued Finklestone, "but Jim Wiggins and other Ravagers are acting as sentries, and we shall be able to take a new departure. The night'll not pass without a change of scene hereabouts, nor without blood and fire! Oh, they'll hear from us," and his eyes gleamed like live coals. "We shall get out of this scrape, boys! We shall connect with the friends outside, thanks to my sister, who can go and come at will in this darkness. We'll have a terrible revenge, too, upon those scouts and the colonel!"

He looked out again—unsubdued and daringly resolute—his face and eyes burning with the fires of his deadly passions.

"How I'd like to get that sheriff and his deputies into my claws!" he continued, looking out again at the trio. "But I'd like to know what they're saying and doing."

"I can creep into the shadow of the house and watch and listen," offered Mrs. Goggin.

"Then go."

After the withdrawal of Mrs. Goggin, the watchers continued to observe the scene before them with increasing interest, although unable to catch more than an occasional word of the conversation.

Little more was said, however, until Brottie had escorted the justice into the house.

"Do you comprehend what that means?" then asked Finklestone, with increased excitement.

"What does it mean?" demanded Rasker.

"It can only mean that the colonel intends to send us to Durango!"

"But why?" asked Jobson.

"Possibly because of something Bossy has said, but more likely because the sheriff happens to be here."

"Will Dutt and his crowd go, too?"

"That remains to be seen."

Hillyer groaned dismally.

"This is worse than death," he muttered. "Once in Durango we cannot escape!"

"We're not there yet," said Finklestone, with a strange smile, "and probably never shall be!"

"What! you don't scare, cap'n?"

"Not a bit!"

All continued to watch and listen.

At the end of a few minutes the colonel and Dimmick were seen to emerge from the house, joining Buffalo Bill, who had remained on the veranda, partly to watch for Ben Letts and partly to keep an eye on Gaddley and his fellow-prisoners.

At this moment Mrs. Goggin stole back to the guard-house favored by the fact that the fire in front of it was burning low. She took the risk of being seen, of course, as she couldn't do otherwise, but circumstances favored her, the eyes of all present being so busy elsewhere, and she passed unnoticed.

"This is horrible, Dorus!" she reported, with a voice and mien of genuine terror. "Sam and the rest are to be sent to Durango on the double charge of abducting Mrs. Naylor and assaulting the sheriff, and you are to go with them!"

Alleyesturned upon Budd, to see how he would take his announcement.

His face glowed like fire.

An awful delight seemed to surge into his breast.

A chuckle worthy of a demon escaped him.

"Ha, ha!" he laughed. "What a nice way out of this box! So much for the mountain in labor! It has indeed brought forth a mouse!"

CHAPTER XLIX.

CONSIDERED TO THE SHERIFF.

It was easy for the Ravagers to realize from the scornful merriment of their leader that he saw a prospect of escape, but they wanted further information.

"Well, cap'n?" queried Hillyer, giving expression to the general anxiety.

"We shall beat them at their own game," he replied, becoming serious. "Not only is Tooker and his crowd near at hand, but so also is Josh Reeder, with Ted Grapple and a host of the boys—in a word, enough to chaw that sheriff and his deputies so quickly as to make their heads swim! There's nothing to fear, therefore! This menace of going to Durango will save us!"

Drawing Mrs. Goggin to his breast as well as his arms permitted, Finklestone whispered a few words in her ear.

"I comprehend," she said.

"Then go," and she vanished.

By the time she was well out of sight, the wagon approached the guard-house and halted in front of it. A few moments more, and the colonel drew near, looking into the guard-house.

"Are the prisoners asleep, Bardwell?" he demanded of one of the guards.

"They were a moment ago, colonel."

"Have they made you any trouble?"

"Not the least, colonel."

The commandant stepped through the entrance, flashing the rays of his lantern around him, and taking in at glance the various features of the scene it revealed.

With one exception, the four prisoners were extended on the straw covering the floor of their prison, and appeared to be asleep.

That exception was Finklestone.

He still sat with his back to the great army-chest, and seemed quietly attentive to all that was transpiring around him.

"I've had curious revelations concerning you, Finklestone, since I last saw you," remarked the commandant, as he caught the eye of the prisoner. "Jack Bossy has been captured, and has told all he knows."

The prisoner tossed his head with an air of the most contemptuous indifference.

"I'm not at all interested in what any such reptile as that may say about me, colonel," he declared, in such a ringing and defiant voice that his fellow-prisoners made a pretense of awakening, realizing that the contrary course would be a piece of folly.

"But the man is dead," pursued the colonel, "and what he said was said as his dying confession."

The prisoner sneered again.

"Let him go for what he is worth, colonel," he rejoined. "Dead or alive, he's nothing to me."

"At any rate, what he said will have a pretty serious influence upon your destiny," announced the commandant. "I'm about to consign you to the sheriff, who brought Jack here, and he'll take you to the jail at the county seat."

"Jail or guard-house, Colonel Naylor," returned the prisoner, "it's all the same to me. Still, you might give me an inkling of his confession."

"You'll know it soon enough, no doubt," said the commandant, sternly. "It is enough for the present to say that his revelations are confirmed by what we have learned elsewhere. He says you are 'Whoop-pee' and 'Bad Medicine!'"

The prisoner sneered audibly.

"Give us something newer," he muttered.

"He says you are plotting with Little Elk and others to destroy the fort and village," pursued the commandant, "and the statement is confirmed by the fact that Little Elk is reported to be at Cinder Butte, having left his reservation."

A swift, guilty flush appeared on the prisoner's face.

"He also says that you have mined this fort," added the colonel, watching the prisoner as a cat watches a mouse.

The statement was like a thrust from a dagger. With all his hardihood, the prisoner could not avoid looking as if he had touched a live coal.

"Are you willing to tell me who you really are?" resumed the colonel.

"I can add nothing to what I've already told you, colonel," answered the prisoner, with a scornful, cynical sneer, recovering his equanimity.

"Then nothing more need be said," decided the commandant. "Assist him, two of you," he added, addressing the nearest guards, "and place him on the front seat of that wagon!"

The transfer was promptly made, but not without the exchange of several whispers between the prisoner and his pretended keepers, and especially between him and Bardwell, who seemed to be recognized as their leader.

"Have you had enough of these irons, Hillyer?" resumed the colonel. "Do you wish to talk with a view to getting out of the bad box in which you find yourself? In a word, are you inclined to tell me what you know about the Ravagers?"

"I would, colonel, if I knew anything about them," answered Hillyer, "but I don't."

The colonel stood a moment in thought, and then addressed similar questions to Dick and Stubby, receiving similar answers.

"Think well upon the subject, all of you," enjoined the colonel, "for you must quit this stubbornness in the morning, or I will send you all before a civil tribunal. I want the information and evidence which any one of you is in a position to give, and I will have it, or you'll all soon find yourselves face to face with a very disagreeable future."

"A threatened dog lives long, Colonel Naylor," returned Dick Rasker, with smiling insolence.

"And that's about the substance of what we all have to say to you," declared Stubby Jobson. "You had better put on an apron and join Zelle in the kitchen."

The commandant surveyed the two with stern reprobation.

"When I came here," he said, "it was not my intention to send you to Durango to-night. But I've changed my mind. You shall go with your leader."

He sent to Mr. Finch a request for the commitment of the whole party, and then proceeded to get them into the wagon, which was roomy enough to receive them all without crowding.

"And now for those chains and padlocks, Dimmick," added the commandant. "We'll fix them so that their arrival at the jail will be a foregone conclusion, unless they are able to fly away with the wagon."

The desired articles were quickly forthcoming from the great army-chest, and all the prisoners, including Gaddley, Ringwood and Tilkins, were secured to the body of the wagon, although not without many a bitter and malignant sneer from them, and especially from Finklestone.

"There! they're ready," at length exclaimed the colonel, ordering Dimmick by a gesture to drive to the rear door. "Quick, Bardwell," he added. "You are now a corporal in the place of Dimmick. Take these three men and get your horses, and fall in as an escort for the sheriff, returning in due course from Durango!"

"Yes, colonel."

In another minute the wagon had rolled up to the rear door and the colonel had returned to his guests and visitors, announcing:

"Your men are ready, sheriff."

"And so are your commitments," supplemented Justice Finch, handing them over. "Of course, I don't need to give the rascals a hearing at present, or even take a look at them."

"Good," commented Sheriff Watrous, arising and pocketing the commitments. "I'm sorry to tear myself away immediately, but I'm sure you'll all excuse us, considering the long ride we have before us."

"Certainly, sheriff," returned the commandant. "Here are the keys of the padlocks," offering them, "and you can return them with the chains at your convenience."

He added a brief statement of his reasons for sending Hillyer and the rest away with their leader, and his energetic action met with hearty approval from Buffalo Bill and the sheriff.

Adieus were then uttered, and the sheriff and his aids went out to the prisoners, just as Bardwell and his comrades came up as an escort, and in another minute the little party had vanished outside of the great gate, the colonel and Mrs. Naylor, with Buffalo Bill and the justice, stepping out on the lawn to witness the departure.

CHAPTER L.

A STARTLING REAPPEARANCE.

"AND is this all you want of me to-night, colonel?" asked Justice Finch.

"All, sir, thank you."

"Then I'll hurry back to Mrs. Finch, as I left her in quite a flutter in consequence of your young man's pressing communication."

He took leave, Dimmick escorting him to the entrance, as usual.

"Such an infernal state of things!" ejaculated the colonel, leading the way to the parlor. "I ought to go and hang myself!"

"Why, John!" cried Mrs. Naylor, with a shocked air.

"It's true, Neerie," he growled, motioning Buffalo Bill to a chair and beginning to walk agitatedly to and fro. "Think of my being taken in to such an extent by that infamous impostor!"

"I see nothing strange about that, John," assured the wife soothingly. "Nothing is more common, in this democratic age, than for the scions of aristocratic and noble houses in Europe to come over here and go into business, get stranded, or be compelled to earn their living by manual labor. I can tell you of half a dozen cases which have come under my notice!"

She hastened to do so.

"And even if such were not the real state of affairs," she resumed, "you are in no wise to blame for being deceived by that man, my dear husband. He's deception itself—hypocrisy incarnate! And then you must remember, he had real papers and documents to lend color and support to all he said—"

"Which he stole from the real Budd Finklestone, it now appears," interrupted the commandant. "The fact is made clear by Jack Bossy's revelations. Jack even asserted that the real Budd Finklestone is a prisoner at the headquarters of the Ravagers. But think of the pits that fraud has dug for me! Think of this fort being mined! It's enough to drive me mad!"

"It's a bad state of things to be sure, John," admitted Mrs. Naylor, with wifely tact, "but please remember that it might be a great deal worse. The fellow's baseness has been made known to us, and he is thoroughly 'hived,' as you were just saying. Moreover, no great harm has been done here. We've neither been swallowed up by the earth nor 'gone kiting' into the air! In short, we've found the man out in good season, and can go quietly to work to repair all our errors of commission and omission!"

"But those mines, Neerie—"

"Jack Bossy may have exaggerated their importance, in the desire to put you on your guard," suggested Mrs. Nayler, "and in any other case we shall be in ample time to escape all harm from them if you have them hunted up to-morrow."

"Then you wouldn't say or do anything about them to-night?"

"Certainly not," was the wife's earnest reply. "Don't breathe a word concerning them to any human being till morning, and then try to get hold of some one of Finklestone's allies who remains as yet unsuspected. He must have left many a dupe within the fort who will be glad to purchase immunity by 'making a clean breast of it! At least we may hope so!"

The colonel reflected intently a couple of minutes, and then said:

"It would really be a mistake to blurt out what I know. That villain may have left some tool here who would send us flying and make his escape. For the moment, I'll confine my measures to a quiet and secret stroll through the fort."

"At this hour, John?" asked Mrs. Nayler, in a flutter. "Is it necessary?"

"Absolutely, Neerie. I wish to transfer Dutt Smiley and his friends to the guard-house, and visit the whole line of sentries."

"Then I must beg of you to take Dimmick or Mr. Cody with you," pleaded Mrs. Nayler. "If you go alone, how easy for some one who has been under arrest, or has otherwise got soured, to give you a fatal shot or stab. Some sentry might shoot you, and then claim that he mistook you for a Ravager!"

"Well, well, I'll take Dimmick to satisfy you," said the colonel, getting ready to go out. "I can't very well take Mr. Cody, as I don't wish to make him too well known to the men, to say nothing of exposing him to some 'shot or stab.'"

"Besides," said Buffalo Bill, arising, with a smile, "I would like to take a turn outside, and go as far as Ben's house. In fact, I'm so uneasy about Ben's non-return, and have had such a good sleep during the day that it would not be of the least use for me to go to bed at present."

The colonel reflected a moment, and then produced the key of the side-door.

"Here, take this," he said, "and come in when you like. You know where your room is. If you should have anything to say to me, you know where I sleep. I comprehend your mood perfectly. You wish to prow around a little on your own account, and come into the house when you get ready, or when Ben returns. I'll give you the countersign for the night, and you'll be the master of the situation."

He went as far as the entrance with the scout, exchanging a few further remarks with him, and then bade him good-night and returned to Mrs. Nayler.

"Don't forget to take Dimmick," she reminded him.

"All right, Neerie. But what if he should be another Finklestone?"

"Oh, he isn't!"

"That's my view, too, and that's why I've promoted him to Finklestone's place," said the commandant. "But I'll watch men and things hereafter, you may be certain!"

"Me, too?" queried Mrs. Nayler, playfully, putting up her lips to be kissed.

"Perhaps so," returned the colonel, smiling in spite of himself. "In any case, the next 'baronet's son' who turns up here in distress will be received in such a style as to make him wish he'd fallen into the hands of the red-skins instead. Meanwhile, you needn't sit up for me, Neerie—"

"I'd sooner do so, John. It's not late, and I'm not at all sleepy."

"Well, have your own way. I won't be gone long."

He consumed about an hour in a survey of the fort and its occupants, taking a walk through the soldiers' barracks, accompanied by Captain Greyson and First Sergeant Dimmick, and then gave his final instructions for the night to these and other trusted officers, hastening back to his wife.

"Everything seems all right, Neerie," he reported, as the ultimate of his views upon the situation. "The next best thing is to get to bed, as I'm not half rested from night before last, and shall probably have a great deal to do to-morrow."

All had become quiet within the house and the fort, and the clock in the village steeple had struck ten, when a man ascended one of the walls of the fort by means of a rope-ladder which had been lowered to him by the sentry on duty at that point.

The new-comer was Budd Finklestone!

CHAPTER LI.

EVENTS AT THE "QUADRANGLE."

WHERE was Ben Letts, and what were he and Ben Clewson doing?

A few words will show.

Nay had bowed their acceptance of the hideous little dwarf's invitation, which had

been garnished with a smile from his ponderous wife, Mrs. Wrexton, and were about to take their places at table with the ill-assorted couple, when five men burst into the parlor from the hall and an inner staircase leading to it, and took the drop on them with revolvers, two of them giving their united attentions to the dwarf.

"Not the least word or movement or you die!" cried the leader of the new-comers.

"Sir Hornby Finklestone!" exclaimed Ben, in joyful amazement, recognizing the man whose weapon covered him.

The baronet stared at him as if spell-bound.

"Sure enough!" added Ben.

Whipping some stout cords out of his pocket, and paying no further heed to Sir Hornby's leveled weapon, he made a gesture to Clew, and the two hurled themselves at the dwarf, silencing his attempts to call for assistance, and gagging him and binding him hand and foot.

Seeing this, and remaining too horrified to even scream, Mrs. Wrexton sunk to the floor in a deathlike swoon.

"Good! that rids us of the pair of them!" cried Ben, with joyous excitement. "And now, Sir Hornby—"

He was interrupted by a glad cry of surprise from one of two young ladies who had followed the five men into the apartment, and the next instant found himself infolded by a pair of well-rounded arms with as much vigor as if he had been a "long-lost brother!"

"Oh, Ben Letts!" came from the fair manifestant of these favors. "How good it is to see your honest face here at such a moment!"

"Ah, it's you, Alice King?" returned Ben, too stupefied with astonishment to reciprocate before she had blushing withdrawn from him. "This is too delightful! And this other young lady, I suppose," he added, with a low bow, "is Miss Sarah Gannett?"

The young lady in question assented, taking him warmly by the hand.

Clew was duly presented to both of them as a very dear friend, and they greeted him with a warmth which made him blush to the roots of his hair.

"You know him, young ladies?" demanded the baronet, who had long since lowered his revolver, and been staring at the proceedings of Ben and Clew with undisguised bewilderment. "He's a friend of yours?"

"Not merely our friend, Sir Hornby, but of every one else who is in trouble," replied Alice King, between smiles and tears—so joyously excited, in fact, that she found it difficult to speak. "Permit me, Sir Hornby. This young gentleman is the hero of whom we were speaking—"

"Ben Letts, do you mean?" interrupted the baronet.

"Yes, Sir Hornby—Ben Letts!"

"Then what a fool I've been to threaten him with that revolver!" said the baronet, almost hurling the weapon out of sight into some pocket. "Forgive me, sir," he added, rushing forward and offering his hand, "and allow us all to thank you for so promptly suppressing this frightful little ruffian. How bewildered I am!"

"But hardly more so, I venture to say, than is everybody at the fort, Sir Hornby, at your very singular disappearance last night or this morning," declared Ben, shaking hands heartily.

"Ah, you know of it?"

"I was there when Doctor Powlett came to announce your flight to the colonel," explained Ben. "Why did you leave so secretly?"

"Because my son wrote me, in a letter I received three weeks ago, that the false Budd Finklestone stood high in the confidence of Colonel Nayler, and was running things at the fort very much in his own fashion—"

The baronet paused a moment, wholly out of breath with excitement.

"Then, too," he resumed, "I found myself robbed of nearly all my cash, bills of exchange, and private papers—"

"Nonsense," interrupted Ben, laughingly. "Colonel Nayler took charge of them to save them for you. You were not in any danger at the fort, but in the hands of the very best of friends!"

"Really?" cried the baronet.

"I pledge you my word of honor!"

"Then I have indeed been a fool," regretted Sir Hornby. "But there are several things to be said to excuse and explain my conduct. To begin with, my son had written me to beware of the Ravagers, and especially of their chief. Are you aware how they chased me to the fort, trying to capture me?"

Ben assented.

"Well, all these things made me nervous," pursued the baronet. "Permit me to add, in further explanation of my flight, that I was laboring under a preoccupation far greater than could have been caused me by the loss of money, however large the amount. In a word, I desired to fly to the rescue of my son, who has so long been shut up in this accursed 'Quadrangle,' and who would have died here if it hadn't been for the devotion of this charming young lady, also a prisoner—"

"He means me, Mr. Letts," said Alice King, taking the arm of a splendid young fellow near her who had been following the developments of the scene with an all-absorbing if puzzled interest, "but between him and his son I'm getting far more praise than I deserve, I assure you!"

"Not a bit, Alice," assured the young gentleman, turning upon her such a glance as a man never bestows outside of his cherished and idolized ideal. "The best we can say of you is not half enough."

"There! no more of that, Buddington," pleaded Alice King, placing one of her dimpled hands over his mouth. "Ben Letts, allow me to introduce you to my betrothed husband, Mr. Buddington Finklestone, the only son of Sir Hornby!"

The amazement of Ben Letts at this turn of affairs was almost as great as his joy.

"Ah, this is the real Budd Finklestone?" he exclaimed, as he shook the hand of the handsome young stranger. "And not much like his fraudulent double, I must say! Good! glorious! I see that all our troubles are to end as they do in fairy stories! Do you know why my friend and I are here, ladies and gentlemen? We came to effect your release, but only to find that you have released yourselves!"

"My father got us out," said young Finklestone. "He gained an entrance to our subterranean prison by capturing one of our keepers as he came out of a private door and taking his place, in which rôle he gave whisky to our jailers and got them all drunk, then taking their keys and opening all our dungeons. These three gentlemen," and he indicated the three who had entered with his father and himself, "are John Scott, Mark Wilton, and Peter Sherwood, who were seized and confined here out of revenge for the resistance they had offered to the raids of these Ravagers."

"And are there no more prisoners here?" asked Ben, as he and Clew proceeded to shake hands with the three last named, and congratulate them on the recovery of their liberty.

"None," answered young Finklestone. "There have been others here, but one died, another made his escape, a third was ransomed, and so on."

"Then let's be off," proposed Ben, as a groan came from Mrs. Wrexton. "My friend and I will not even pause now to take a look at the place, as we shall come back here later with a body of troops. There are horses on the premises, I suppose?"

"Plenty of them, and of the best!" answered young Finklestone.

"Then let's get ten or a dozen of them at the door and take our departure. This dwarf and his wife shall go with us."

This project was not carried out without some opposition from two men in the stable, but Ben and Clew promptly suppressed them, and then mounted their prisoners and secured them to their saddles, striking out with their new friends at a rapid gait for home and the fort.

CHAPTER LII.

HOW HIS FATE OVERTOOK HIM.

LET us now go back to the false Budd Finklestone, whom we left at the moment he reached the top of one of the bastions of the fort.

"Is it really you, cap'n?" whispered the sentry, as the sinister impostor reached the top of the wall and drew himself up beside him.

"Don't you see it's me?"

"Well, I recognized your voice, and you also gave me our private signal, but—"

"But what, Tim?"

"How can it be you?"

The new-comer struck a fuse, the flame of which, as he proceeded to light a cigar, revealed his features to the sentry with such distinctness that no doubt as to his identity was possible.

Drawing three additional fuses from his pocket, he proceeded to strike them in rapid succession, throwing them away after he had given them a swift flourish.

"That's to tell the boys I've crossed old Nayler's 'dead line' in safety," he remarked. "It is also to tell the boys to hold themselves in readiness for a swift departure. You now see it's me, don't you, Tim?"

"Yes, cap'n. But what about that sheriff?"

"He and I have changed places, that's all," explained Budd. "I was released this side of the forks by Tooker, with the aid of Bardwell—"

"What! are all the boys free again? Gaddley and the rest?"

"Every man of them," replied Budd. "Tooker had an anvil and hammer ready for our irons, with cold chisels and everything necessary, to say nothing of keys. Watrous and his deputies are now in our hands—there! not a hundred rods away—bound and gagged and chained to the wagon!"

"Good!" commented the sentry. "You'll take him to the 'Quadrangle,' I hope, and diet him on bread and water?"

"Or chain him to some tree and let the wolves

"Interview him," suggested Budd, with terrible malignancy. "I have not yet decided. I'm here now to get the colonel and the colonel's wife. Also those infernal scouts. I'm going to make a clean sweep!"

"And then the old fort goes kiting?"

"Exactly! But of course all the boys are to be out of it first, including Dutt Smiley."

As he finished speaking, he leaned over the edge of the wall, and called softly:

"You can come up, boys."

A slight noise succeeded, as of some one ascending in contact with the wall, and the next instant a man appeared at the top of the wall beside the captain.

He was followed by others in rapid succession until a dozen men had joined Budd and stood awaiting his orders.

They were all so well hidden by the darkness of that wild, blustering night that no one could have seen them at a distance of six yards.

"You are disguised, Josh?" queried Budd.

"Yes—as a captain."

"And your men have knapsacks?"

"Just as you ordered, cap'n."

"Then go to the guard-house and fetch Dutt Smiley and the rest here. Cook and Brower are in charge of them, and will give you every assistance possible. You needn't take any pains to avoid being seen. Proceed boldly. It will be supposed that you are acting by the colonel's orders and that the prisoners are being moved again. They know we're coming for them. There's nothing to explain. Pick them up and vanish!"

"But what if they should be chained to the wall or floor?"

"They're not!"

"But I thought they were in a casemate?"

"No. They've been moved since the sheriff and I started on our little ride."

Josh and his men vanished.

In three minutes he and they were back again, bringing four manacled figures.

"I've got 'em," he reported.

"Then take them to that anvil and knock off their irons, reporting to Tooker. Cook and Brower are with you?"

"Yes, cap'n."

"That relieves old Nayler of any further care of Ravagers," commented Budd, with smiling sarcasm. "Vanish, all!"

The helpless men were lowered from the bastion with scarcely a sound, so well were their irons handled.

Budd remained silent.

His first measure was to draw up the rope-ladder and detach it from a ring in the end of a stick which had been driven out of sight into the earth covering the bastion, and which thus attested that this sort of ladder, like this sort of proceeding, had become a regular fixture of the fort.

Then he dropped the ladder outside the wall.

"Take it away," he said.

Waiting until all sounds from Josh and his party had ceased, Finklestone gave utterance to a low, strange sound, which would have passed equally well for the cry of some insect, reptile, or bird.

This sound was evidently a well-known secret signal of Budd to his men, and it appeared to be directed to some particular man, for a dark figure soon appeared beside him.

"It's me, cap'n—Ted," announced the new-comer.

"Good," was the response, in a tone of joy and relief. "Is your wagon at the gate?"

"That is to say, as near to it as is safe. Within a dozen rods, perhaps."

"Then come!"

Budd drew the arm of the new-comer within his own and moved away, saying:

"I'm determined to have those parties, Ted, and am going to use strategy. That's why I take only you with me."

"But what sort of strategy?"

"I'll soon tell you!"

Nothing more was said until the couple had reached the side-door of the colonel's house.

"We have of course reached here unseen, Ted," whispered Finklestone. "So much for being familiar with every foot of the place."

"Exactly."

"And now to understand what we are about, Ted," resumed Finklestone, in a guarded tone.

"During the last few days, comprehending that my stay here would soon be ended, I have made all necessary arrangements for just such a job as I now propose to execute."

"Just how, Budd?"

"Why, I've loosened the rods in the cellar window, so that I can readily enter from that point," explained Finklestone. "I've tampered with the fastenings of two of the windows on the first floor, and loosened a board under the sofa in the colonel's reception-room, thus making a second route possible. I have procured keys to all the doors, and unscrewed the hinges of at least two of them, leaving them in such shape that a single wrench will give me admittance. In a word, the house is as open as a sieve to me!"

"How nice!" breathed his companion.

"And that isn't all," continued Finklestone. "I have a certain bottle and sponge with me,

and am going to chloroform the colonel and his wife, as also those scouts, beginning with Nayler."

"I see."

"All are evidently asleep. What I want of you is to seize Mrs. Nayler, if she should appear while I am dealing with her husband. Choke her to insensibility if necessary."

"But suppose the place should get too hot to hold us?"

"It won't. But in case of any such accident, we'll run for it, gaining the wagon. We'll now enter. Take my left hand, and simply yield to my guidance. But first take off your boots, as I'm doing."

The couple were soon ready, and Budd produced a key and unlocked the door, then leading the way into the house in silence.

"It's rather a bold thing to do," whispered his companion.

"Yes, but sure! You have that knife I suggested?"

"Yes."

"Well, strike home, if I give you the word! If we can't get away with them, we will at least do the other thing! Comprehend?"

"Perfectly."

"Then come."

He drew his companion along the hall, with that ease and silence which could come only from long familiarity, and in a few moments more the couple were in the colonel's bedroom.

"Here we are!" cried Budd's companion.

Two doors opened, allowing several lights to flash upon the scene, and Budd found himself in the midst of twenty armed men, several of whom covered him with their revolvers!

He had met his fate!

CHAPTER LIII.

THE END OF THE GAME.

THE prisoner stood as if paralyzed, unable to move or speak.

His eyes stared without seeing.

The man he had supposed to be Ted Gruppel was the first object of his recognition, and turned out to be Buffalo Bill!

Next he recognized Colonel Nayler, who was seated immediately in front of him.

By this time the commandant spoke.

"Not the least move, Budd," he ordered.

"Of course not," responded the prisoner.

Two men advanced and bound his hands behind him, seating him in a chair.

Then his ankles were ironed, so that he could not have walked a step, even if supported by each arm.

"Who has given me way, colonel?" he demanded, as white as a sheet, and with a voice of indescribable consternation.

"Me," answered a voice.

Budd looked at the speaker.

"Ted?" he gasped.

"Yes, Ted," avowed the traitor, with angry scorn and bitterness.

"And why?"

"Because of that sister. She has engaged herself to seven of us," and he waved his hand around, "and we've tired of being her dupes, since she has promised herself to Ringwood."

Budd stared at the envenomed speaker a long time in silence.

Then a stir in the parlor fixed his attention.

"She's better now," said a voice, which he recognized as Mrs. Nayler's.

"Yes, she's recovering."

This last speaker was Zellie.

Then came a groan.

"Who's there?" asked Budd, with a horrible suspicion revealing itself on his face.

"Your sister," answered the colonel. "Ted thought the least he could do to get square with her was to give her into my hands!"

"The villain! Dollie has had nothing whatever to do with my affairs—"

The commandant interrupted him with an impatient gesture.

"You needn't say a word on that head, Budd," he said. "We know enough about her to make her finish her days within four walls. As to you— But I need not speak of your future! Your own conscience will tell you what you have to expect!"

"Are you there, Dorus?" called his sister.

"Naturally—after the way in which we have managed our affairs," answered Budd ungraciously. "Your seven promised husbands are here, too!"

Another groan came from the parlor.

"You needn't speak to me in that way, Dorus," then said Mrs. Goggin. "You told me to wheedle as many of them as I could, and all of them as much as I could. I've only obeyed your orders!"

The colonel interposed.

"There's no need of these mutual recriminations, Budd," he said. "Let's get down to a few hard facts, and then you'll go to the guard-house, preparatory to taking a new start for Durango in the morning. To begin with, I have captured all the Ravagers who have been associated with you since you came here as an enlisted man!"

"Well, some of them are free again—Dutt Smiley, for instance!"

"Not much," returned the colonel.

"Didn't I just send him out of the fort in the hands of Josh Reeder?"

"Not at all. Josh himself is a prisoner. The men you took to be Josh and his aides were a dozen of my most trusted men under Captain Grayson."

"But Sam and Hank—"

"Are both in my hands!"

"And Tooker—"

"He is now in a casemate, with all his tribe!"

"Then the sheriff—"

"Oh, yes! Watrous and his deputies are safe. Look behind!"

Budd obeyed, and shuddered with horror as he found the sheriff and his deputies among his captors.

"Oh, that I could again have those mines at my disposal!" he groaned. "I'd soon fix you!"

"Well, that can never be!" proclaimed the commandant, sternly. "Ted has told us where those mines are located, and they have received due attention. All trace of them has been removed, and all danger from that source is averted!"

"It cannot be! So soon?"

"Yes, it can, and I'll show you how," replied the colonel. "Buffalo Bill went out of the fort, just after you left with the sheriff, and was met by Ted, who opened the sluice-ways of his confessions. Within five minutes thereafter I was duly enlightened, and my orders had been issued to all my officers and men, almost three hundred in number, and we all hastened to do our duty! Need I say more? You've reached the end of your game!"

At this moment a strange *Tra-li-lee-too* rung out sonorously from just outside of the great gate, and Buffalo Bill sprang to his feet with a flush of excitement.

"There's Ben!" he cried. "Ben in all his glory and triumph! That be one of the old signals of a splendid victory!"

"Indeed!" returned the colonel, gaining his feet. "Then let me throw a little light on the subject."

He ran to the door and touched the gong suspended there, when a grand illumination appeared on the top of an adjacent bastion, precisely as on previous occasions.

And what a scene did it reveal as the great gate opened!

"The baronet!" cried Cody.

"Alice King and Sarah Gannett!" exclaimed another.

"Oh, horror!" came from a window which Zellie had raised. "Look, Dorus! They've captured Wrexton and mother!"

There is no need to linger upon what happened, further.

The reception of Ben Letts was an ovation of fort and village, and he only wished that Ben Clewson had come with him to have his share of it, and that Esther could have been there to rejoice with him.

Dorus and Dollie were soon confronted with their mother and the dwarf, and out of that confronting came accusations and admissions that would have almost sufficed to send them all to the gallows.

They were all landed in prison in due course—the false Finklestone going for life on several charges, one of which was of highway robbery, and covered the crime he had committed against young Finklestone, in robbing him, and thus securing a foundation for the career he had run in his name.

An expedition was made to the "Quadrangle," resulting in the discovery of a cave under the Wrexton house, and also in the recovery of many loads of valuables, after which the whole hamlet was given over to destruction, it being devastated with fire and gunpowder until the very configuration of the soil could be no longer recognized.

Buffalo Bill remained the guest of Colonel Nayler and his wife a few days, or long enough to attend the wedding of Ben Letts and Esther Clewson; then he rode away as quietly as he had come, giving his attention to new spheres of action and the new duties that it was destined he should assume.

As to the considerable body of Ravagers who had fallen into Nayler's hands, some of them, like Ted Gruppel, were treated with due consideration, but the most of them received such severe punishment as to break up and disperse all who had ever had anything to do with them, so that within a few months after the scenes we have related their exploits had almost passed out of notice.

THE END.

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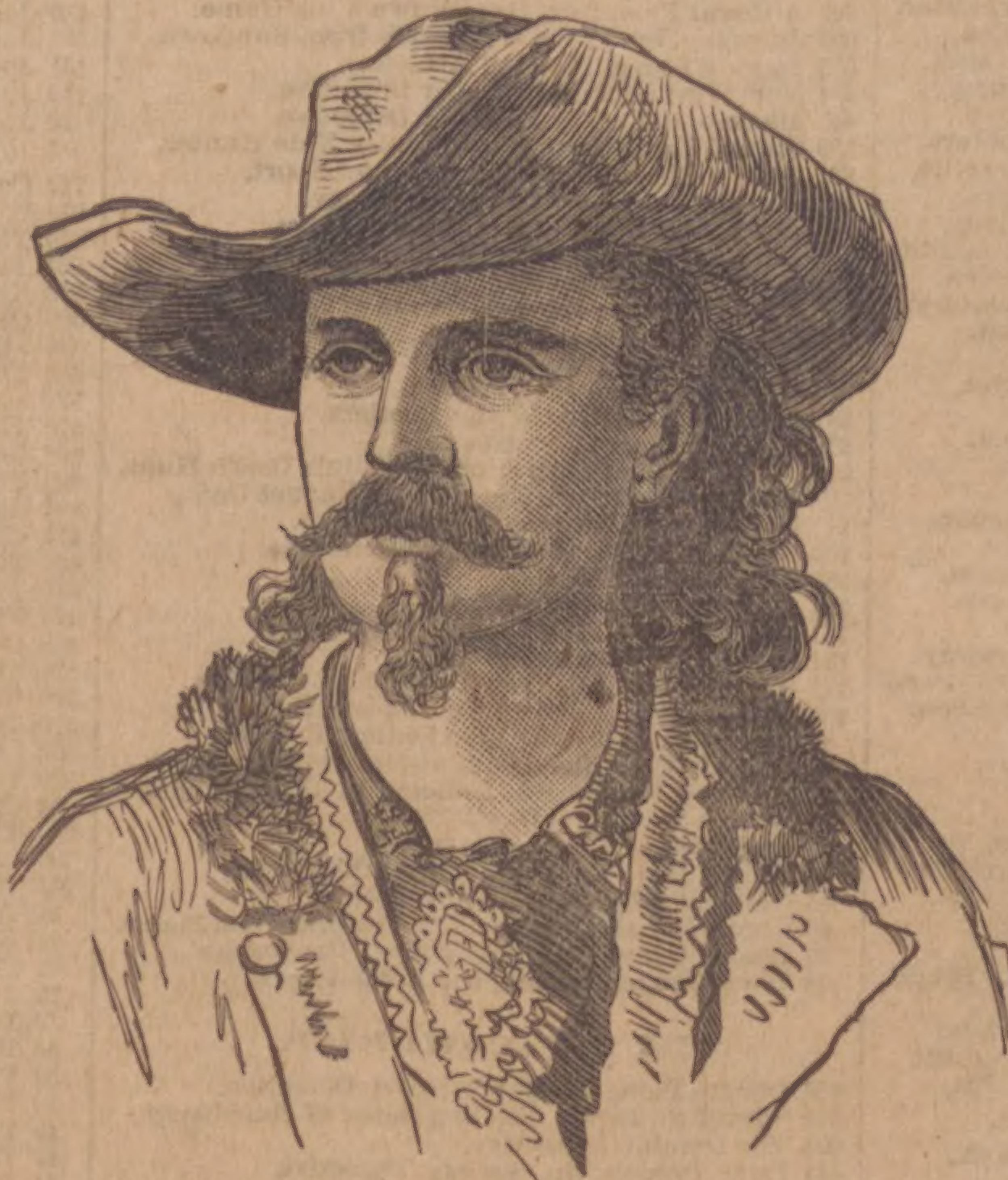
THE career of Buffalo Bill has been, in all respects, remarkable. Probably no living man has seen more life in its most romantic and startling phases, or had a wider range of acquaintance, or has more interested the public in his personal qualities and character.

Coming out of the Wild West when what is now farms, ranches and cattle ranges was the feeding-ground of the buffalo, the home of the untamed Indian, and the haunt of the outlaw—he is, literally, a Child of the Plains—the Knight of the Border—the typical Man of the West.

In early boyhood his father was murdered in the so-called "Kansas war," when ruffians overran Eastern Kansas, and murder, pillage and violence held wild riot. It was then the boy so asserted himself that before he was fifteen years of age, Billy Cody was noted for his nerve, and for his readiness for any dangerous service.

From one daring or arduous performance to another he so progressed in public estimation that when he was eighteen years old he was known from the Missouri to the Red River of Texas as one of the best shots, most expert horse-men, most successful hunters, most daring scouts, most skilled Indian fighters, most sagacious guides, and most fearless Pony Express carrier in all the land.

In such a life the romance writer finds ready-made material; in such a career, acts, and facts, and actualities are but to be reproduced in nar-



BUFFALO BILL.

ative to make a story full of the wildest, keenest, most varied interest. Here is a hero who is no myth, no fiction; and American literature has found in him such a character as gives to it an originality, a virility, that lifts it at once to a new plane.

With his later career the public is familiar. His great WILD WEST SHOW has made his name, in Europe and America, a household word; and now, in Chicago, he will give a crowning glory to his fame by his wonderful Wild West Exhibition, and illustrating in his person, to the assembled millions, the true type of a Representative American Citizen.

It has been the good fortune and the exceeding pleasure of the publishers of this series to place before readers a considerable number of stories of the Wild West, from the pens of writers of national fame, in which Buffalo Bill is the central figure, and in which many of his plains pards are associated with him—largely real episodes in his strange and exciting life.

It has also been our special good fortune to obtain from Mr. Cody's own hand a considerable number of romances of wilderness life—of army life, of Indian life, of mountain and mining life, of life on the ranges—in all of which we have what is, unquestionably, some of the most unique, interesting and stirring works in American romance literature.

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